

EUPHEMISTIC RHETORIC IN ADVERTISING DURING THE COMSTOCK ERA: THE  
IMPORTANCE OF PERSONA AND CULTURAL CONTEXT IN THE LYSOL CASE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## Abstract

From the 1930s to the 1960s, the Lysol douche was the best-selling form of birth control in the U.S.; it was used by women from all socio-economic backgrounds. This dissertation examines the Lysol douche campaign that ran in *Hearst's Cosmopolitan* and *McCall's* during the 1920s and 1930s, which advertised Lysol as a “personal antiseptic” and “feminine hygiene product.” I chronicle the strategies that the ads used to address women as the primary birth control consumers in their households. This dissertation asserts that Lysol used euphemistic rhetoric and strategic ambiguity combined with powerful, culturally derived arguments about motherhood, marriage, and the authority of science to sell the Lysol douche. Lysol appealed to a tangential connection with the medical community to assume a position of authority in advertising to women. Lysol's campaign employed aspirational models of wives and mothers based on the changing cultural norms of marriage and motherhood in this time period. Ads encouraged women to stay young, healthy, and “dainty” for their husbands and families. The campaign relied on aspirational images of women who douched with Lysol as wealthy, healthy, and desired in long-term romantic marriages. Negatively toned ads warned women of the consequences of unwanted pregnancy, including divorce, poverty and social stigma. The campaign also provided supposed advice from women “physicians” and coopted language from bacteriology and public health campaigns to convince women that Lysol was a trustworthy product with scientific backing. I demonstrate how these strategies exploited women's fears and insecurities about being able to adequately care for their health, marriages, and families. This dissertation chronicles the historical moment of the Lysol douche in advertising history. I conclude by addressing the implications of this study for contemporary birth control advertising.

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## Chapter 1

### Niche Marketing and the Antiseptic Douche

Beginning in 1911, the Dorothy Gray Corporation began to import its products to the United States. Among those products was the disinfectant Lysol, which was originally marketed as a household cleaner and disinfectant.<sup>1</sup> In 1925, Lysol was acquired by Lehn and Fink Products Co.<sup>2</sup> During this time period, advertisers began to move toward a more “niche” model of marketing, and several new advertising strategies were employed to market the differences among products that were essentially similar.<sup>3</sup> As advertising scholar Charles McGovern has stated, advertisers at this time began to draw connections between consumerism and citizenship, reinforcing the messages of U.S. citizens as consumers by “voting” with their dollars.<sup>4</sup> Just as women were gaining the vote through the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, they were also being targeted by advertisers who thought they were unsophisticated and easily manipulated.<sup>5</sup> Concurrently, manufacturers developed different ways to move products off the shelves and into U.S. homes.<sup>6</sup> As part of this move toward market expansion, Lehn and Fink began to market Lysol for different purposes besides household cleaning. Ads for Lysol were aimed at women in numerous ways. Some ads intended for nurses informed of the antiseptic benefits of using Lysol in hospitals and for care of patients, some encouraged women to use the cleaning product in their homes, and some of the ads were aimed at personal hygiene use.<sup>7</sup> One of the most prominent ways that Lysol was advertised in ladies’ magazines at this time was as a “feminine hygiene” product, a term which became popular in the early 1900s.<sup>8</sup> Ads for “feminine hygiene” products were a growing trend in the 1920s and 1930s and signified a highly profitable market that advertisers created through the U.S. public’s concern with hygiene.

This dissertation analyzes ads produced by Lehn and Fink in the 1920s and 1930s to convince women to douche with Lysol for the purpose of birth control. The Lysol douche ads addressed women directly and used coded testimonials, strategies also employed with other feminine hygiene products such as Kotex and feminine deodorants.<sup>9</sup> However, the Lysol douche was also covertly advertised as a method of birth control due to Comstock restrictions. The Comstock Act, passed in 1873, criminalized sending items deemed obscene through the mail. This included information about human reproduction and contraception. In the 1920s, any mention of birth control was an offense against public decency. Other forms of birth control were not widely available and laws governed any mention or distribution of birth control in any capacity. In the time period before the mention of birth control was legal, advertisers were forced to resort to euphemisms and vagueness as marketing strategies. This strategy of vagueness allowed advertisers to market their products as “feminine hygiene” products and fill a market need, while avoiding the legal problems associated with advertising birth control.

Previous research into advertising aimed at women in the 1920s and 1930s has commented on how women were often targeted as the main consumers of household products.<sup>10</sup> This was also true in the case of fertility issues, as women were seen as completely responsible for all aspects of the home, including the avoidance of pregnancy.<sup>11</sup> Ads in this time period also began to focus heavily on hygiene concerns and to create urgency for women to purchase products that would help them to assimilate into the changing norms of the U.S. middle class, especially women who found themselves in the middle class for the first time or those who were immigrants.<sup>12</sup> A 1947 study conducted by sociologist Earl Koos reported that women in this time period received more advice about birth control from advertising than from the medical community.<sup>13</sup> This created a rhetorical space for advertisers to colonize the female body in new

ways, and also for advertisers to employ new rhetorical strategies to prey on the fears of women. This was especially true regarding fears of inadequate hygiene and the social mortification of being embarrassed by odors or the perception of uncleanness. A rhetorical analysis of the strategies and conventions used in an effort to persuade women to participate in such rituals is important if we are to understand birth control in this time period. The Lysol douche ads provide an example of how cultural and economic factors colluded to create a specific cultural climate in which advertisers were able to rhetorically craft messages to sell a product that was officially not for sale in this country.

This dissertation examines the rhetoric of the Lysol douche to explore how a household chemical and dangerous carcinogen was advertised successfully as a form of birth control. I argue that Lysol used euphemistic rhetoric to avoid prosecution, but also to appeal to particular segments of the population who were unable to obtain birth control in any other way. The creation of an ideal wife and mother in Lysol ads exploited women's fears of being seen as unhygienic, careless, or willfully ignorant. Lysol's arguments may have been particularly compelling for women who wished to assimilate to what they perceived as the new U.S. norm of marriage and family life. Additionally, the use of scientific language and physician testimonials created a false sense of security for U.S. women who believed that their lives would be improved through technology and gave great credence to the authority of physicians and the institution of medicine. These culturally coded messages exposed deep rifts in the fabric of American life as the social norms radically changed, but they also manipulated American women into believing that douching with Lysol would allow them to effortlessly assume charmed lives with romantic marriages, enhanced economic status, and limited family sizes. Methods of advertising to women have been widely studied by Inger Stole, Roland Marchand, and Cynthia Henthorn. This

dissertation adds to scholarly knowledge about euphemistic advertising and its societal effects, as well as adding to historical understandings of feminine hygiene rhetoric.

### **Rhetorical Assumptions Shaping This Study**

Rhetorical methods are uniquely suited to this inquiry. This project required a close reading of the ads while acknowledging the role of context and the possibility of polysemous readings of the text. This section will unpack the way that I approached this project. I am working with five rhetorical assumptions in this study. First, I argue that it is valuable to study popular discourse. Next, I contend that one way to account for women's experiences is to study messages directed at women. Third, I note that rhetorical discourse is often euphemistic and polysemous. Fourth, it is important to state that rhetoric is multi-modal, involving both the visual and the verbal. Finally, I argue that rhetoric offers useful critical tools for studying large groups of texts. I address each of these points in further depth below.

First, I believe that it is valuable to study popular discourse. As Ernest J. Wraga notes in, *Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History*, "there is increasing awareness that adequate social and intellectual history cannot be written without accounting for popular opinions, beliefs, constellations of attitudes and the like."<sup>14</sup> Ostensibly, advertising encompasses the "popular opinions" that Wraga directs rhetorical scholars to engage. John Sloop and Kent Ono also make the case for studying the everyday discourse of people, as opposed to "elite speeches," in their study of vernacular rhetoric. Sloop and Ono direct rhetorical scholars to address the rhetoric of the powerless and oppressed, and through this inquiry to address discourse that is created by those in the "margins," including women and lesbians.<sup>15</sup> While advertisements by a major corporation do not usually fall under the heading of vernacular

rhetoric as defined by Ono and Sloop, I argue that these ads are a “vernacular” because of the ways that groups of women read them, often reading into the messages beyond the literal in ways that advertisers intended, however these readings were not available to all viewers and indicate in some way a community of women who were able to “read” the ads.

This “rhetoric from the margins” approach marks my second underlying assumption about rhetoric, which notes that one way to account for the women’s experiences is to study messages directed at them. Many scholars, such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, have examined the rhetoric of women as discourse that was previously overlooked. While this study examined particular messages directed at women, it is important to note that messages directed at women often varied widely and were strategically developed to include a style that advertisers believed would appeal to women. Eve Weiderhold, who argues that the form of discourse is in and of itself a feminist issue, also invokes this idea of rhetoric from the margins. Weiderhold writes, “Form- that which gets recognized, assigned meaning, debated, made relevant, or dismissed- is a feminist issue.”<sup>16</sup> Women’s issues are often the issues that are considered less than relevant or outright dismissed. The idea that women’s speeches and writings are entirely unrecognizable or ignored is clearly not the case, instead the issue is how these messages are read and the audience to which they are directed. By studying ads aimed at women, we can learn how they were treated and viewed as an audience by advertisers and represented as a group of consumers. The voice of individual women was not heard, but the collective voice of the consumer can stand in numerous ways for the voice of women, and the way that women were perceived as an audience by advertisers. The commercial exploitation of women as a group by advertisers can be clearly observed through the notion that women would perhaps respond best to messages that were different from those addressed to men in this time period.

Third, it is important to note that rhetorical discourse is often polysemous. As John Fiske explains in his work on polysemy, all work invites the critic to engage with “the gaps” of texts.<sup>17</sup> As a lens through which to view what I have named “euphemistic rhetoric,” the concept of polysemy invokes the idea that texts can be read differently depending on audience, and makes available conceptually the idea that not all readings are available or valued in the same way. Martha Solomon argues that polysemy is a rhetorical strategy on the part of the rhetor, as opposed to a non-dominant reading by the audience of a text.<sup>18</sup> As Robin Jensen indicates, “polysemy can act as the defining rhetorical feature of a larger societal discourse.”<sup>19</sup> Jensen argues that discourse about sex and reproduction is often likely to be polysemous because of its controversial nature. Leah Ceccarelli explains there are three ways for scholars to approach polysemous texts.<sup>20</sup> The first is “resistive reading,” in which audiences are able to subvert the dominant social or political messages of a text through their own readings. The second is what Ceccarelli terms “hermeneutic depth,” in which a scholar argues not for the way that a text is read by the audience, but for the way the text should be read. Finally, Ceccarelli refers to “strategic ambiguity,” in which rhetors make the choice to appeal to more than one group of readers, in a bid to appeal to more audiences or to avoid persecution. In this study, I will be focusing on the idea of strategic ambiguity.

Euphemism is a form of strategic ambiguity. While not as studied as other language tropes, previous rhetorical research has explored the issue of euphemism in a few different ways. The use of euphemism as a powerful tool in rhetorical practices is elaborated on by Jeanne Fahnestock, who describes euphemism as, “the substitution of a polite or mild expression for a crude, offensive or obscene one.”<sup>21</sup> Fahnestock points to the use of euphemism by abolitionists to describe sexual abuse perpetrated by slave owners as a persuasive argument against slavery,



while maintaining standards of language particular to the time period. Further, Robert Hariman's work on evil admonishes rhetoricians to avoid euphemism in the marking of evil. He demonstrates that, "Structural evil needs to be marked and challenged" because of the ability of public discourse to obfuscate the actual reality of structural harmfulness.<sup>22</sup> But scholars have studied euphemism as more than just a term to describe imperfect or deliberately vague communication in the public sphere. Diane Mowry and Eve Duffy expound upon the definition of euphemism as a form of power.<sup>23</sup> They postulate that both the language used for the extermination of the Jewish people under the Third Reich and the way that modern society describes animals is both an effacing and desensitizing use of language. They describe how Western populations, especially, refer to livestock as opposed to pets and how the language used about both serves to hide uncomfortable concepts, as well as comforting human feelings about slaughtering animals. They write, "The employment of euphemisms has been so effective in effacing the exploitation of this anti-ideological group, that often the same parent who would not hesitate to spank little Johnny for pulling his dog's tail is able also, without any conscious sense of ambiguity, to force Johnny to eat his 'steak' or 'hamburger' or 'veal' and to wear his coat made of 'leather' or 'fur' or 'down'." <sup>24</sup> This use of strategic ambiguity allows the western world to indulge in behavior toward animals that would otherwise be seen as heinous and reprehensible. This is similar to the way that society reacted to information about birth control in this time period. While many were opposed to information about women's bodies or sexual hygiene, there was little to no push back to the term "feminine hygiene." This use of euphemism served advertisers well and continues to be used today.

Additionally, one further way to explore the concept of euphemism is through the concept of persona. The idea that advertisements or other rhetorical texts may be read

euphemistically by some audiences and not by others is an important facet of rhetorical study. Scholars have examined how authors create persona in the written text, as well as construct credibility through persona. In his article titled “Pink Herring and the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover’s Sex Crime Panic,” Charles Morris III arrives at a fourth persona. The fourth persona is a “collusive audience constituted by the textual wink.”<sup>25</sup> The textual wink functions to hold two ideological positions simultaneously, as in the case of Hoover and questions about his sexuality. This project seeks to contribute to the critical conversations about polysemy and persona, as well as examine the euphemistic rhetoric of birth control advertising.

The idea that rhetoric is multi-modal is not new, but instead expands how scholars think about rhetorical messages. While rhetoric is often thought of as primarily focused on the written text or oratory, the place of visual rhetoric is firmly established in the field. As Joddy Murray argues in *Non-Discursive Rhetoric: Image and Affect in Multi-Modal Composition*, “rhetoric throughout history has taken advantage of our ability as a species to symbolize through non-discursive text; more than one-to-one correspondence between sender to message to receiver: and then any supposition that symbolization is primarily a set of (arbitrary) linguistic systems useful in communicating thought transparently from sender to receiver.”<sup>26</sup> Visual scholars advocate for the examination of both the visual and the textual, through the lens of context. As Lester Olson, Cara Finnegan, and Diane Hope explain, “in practice and in principle, words and images are oftentimes mixed together in interesting ways. To study visual rhetoric, then, means not to study images or artifacts in isolation from larger textual or performative contexts in which an audience might encounter them, but rather in precise relation to those contexts that give them shape and meaning.”<sup>27</sup> The importance of both the visual and the textual within context is key to visual rhetoric methodology. Cara Finnegan’s “Studying Visual Modes of Public Address: Lewis

Hine's Progressive Era Child Labor Rhetoric" advocates for five approaches to visual methodology, including the study of production, composition, reproduction, circulation, and reception, each of which guide how visual rhetoric scholars approach these questions.<sup>28</sup> As Finnegan's work points out, the importance of technical aspects of the visual is paramount for visual rhetoric scholars. Knowledge of production, or how images are made, is imperative for visual rhetoric scholars.<sup>29</sup> The ability to "read" images is influenced by the scholar's knowledge of how they may have been created. This is especially true in the case of advertising, which often relies heavily on the visual to make an argument. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen explore the issue of how images address the viewer, positing that images address the viewer directly through gaze.<sup>30</sup> As advertisements often rely on the formation of a "relationship" with the consumer, it stands to reason that "addressing" the viewer plays heavily into how advertisements can be read by consumers. Multi-modal methodologies incorporate both the textual and the visual, and provide numerous tools for scholars to access how euphemistic advertisements might function. Gillian Rose indicates for attention to the institutional, social, and cultural production of images which can explain why and how images are selectively chosen.<sup>31</sup> The selectiveness of images can be revealing about who is in charge, what their goals are, and who is being excluded. Linda Scott argues that advertising is a ubiquitous form of visual culture, and that Westerners are so used to seeing advertisements that we allow advertisements to set the "tone" for visual culture.<sup>32</sup> According to Scott, tone can be quite compelling as it sets the standards for lived experience through the visual and draws the viewer in through use of photographic tropes. These tropes become ingrained in visual culture over time and can provide the rhetorical scholar with many resources for addressing visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric approaches allow the author to account for and identify topoi present in and across advertisements. This methodology allows me

to account for all of these concepts as from both a visual and textual angle, as well as providing for development and change over time. I analyzed the entire group of texts along with historical and social context to allow categories to emerge organically.

I argue that rhetorical methodology offers useful critical tools for analyzing large groups of texts. Large groups of texts can be very helpful to the rhetor because they allow the rhetor to track changes over time, to read texts in conversation, and to access ideas of generalizability and idealized audiences. As Vanessa Beasley's *You, the People: National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* notes, the creation of a class or genre of text can reveal more than just the type of text, instead pointing to the ideology underlying the texts and representations of idealized audiences.<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, Vanessa Beasley analyzes the rhetoric of three U.S. presidents on the single issue of suffrage to examine what this can tell us about the transformation of women to voters in this time period.<sup>34</sup> The usefulness of studies of large groups of text is not only salient in the area of presidential rhetoric, but expands to other rhetorical projects as well. As demonstrated by Robin Jensen's article, "The Eating Disordered Lifestyle: Imagetexts and the Performance of Similitude," the collection of large groups of texts can be revealing of ideology in many forms, even those counter to medical opinion and popular culture.<sup>35</sup> This project uses the rhetorical methodology of examining large groups of texts to illuminate underlying ideology and imagined audience.

### **Justification of the Study**

Numerous scholars have examined the methods and outcomes of advertising to women, most notably Charles McGovern and Roland Marchand. Previous research into advertising aimed at women in the 1920s and 1930s has commented on how women were often targeted as the main consumers of household products.<sup>36</sup> However, few scholars have engaged advertising for

feminine hygiene as a separate genre of advertising to women.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, studies of birth control advertising have often neglected to see that the confluence of legal discourse, cultural socialization about birth control norms, and rhetorical structure of the ads themselves have played a large role in the success (or lack of success) of such advertising. Scholars also neglect to draw larger picture results of how these advertisements have played into contemporary social consciousness about birth control. Ads in this time period began to focus heavily on hygiene concerns and to create urgency for women to purchase products that would help them to assimilate into the norms of the middle class, especially women who found themselves in the middle class for the first time or those who were immigrants.<sup>38</sup> Scholars note that women were seen as completely responsible for all aspects of the home, including the avoidance of pregnancy.<sup>39</sup> This created a rhetorical space for advertisers to colonize the female body in new ways, and also for advertisers to employ new rhetorical strategies to prey on the fears of women. Ads for feminine hygiene paved the way for a fuller acceptance of birth control methods among the general public, as well as fueling women's search for knowledge on the subject, even if this often resulted in harm to their own bodies. Advertising is a medium that tells us about the social narrative of the time period. The study of advertising is compelling because it provides a socio-cultural angle from which to view human behavior. Advertising has been studied by the academy extensively; however, as Benjamin Barber notes in *Consumed*, the idea that advertisers play a role in our cultural consciousness has developed only rather recently.<sup>40</sup> This study is especially timely in light of the current social climate surrounding advertising and prescription medication, especially contraceptives.<sup>41</sup> The influx of prescription advertising in new media prompts scholars to explore the consequences of such advertising. Additionally, this study contributes to a fuller understanding of how advertisers appealed to women. The study of these social narratives is a

contribution to scholarly historical understanding of the time period and the vestiges of these narratives still present in contemporary life.

This dissertation examines how the rhetoric of advertisers, the law, and the practice of medicine affected contraception in the United States in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While changing attitudes about birth control in this time period have been widely documented by scholars including Andrea Tone and Kristin Hall, further research is needed to expand the knowledge base about historical birth control rhetoric. This project uses the lens of advertising history to study examples of birth control products that were often are not treated as such. As Amy Sarch notes, U.S. cultural norms of contraceptive use are based in a social narrative of their history, which includes the rhetoric surrounding early use and rhetoric created by advertisers.<sup>42</sup> This social narrative has implications for race, class, and gender, as well as our contemporary understandings of contraception and advertising. More specifically, this dissertation views advertising as a vital window into women's lives and reproductive needs in the 1920s and 1930s. Because of the restrictions of legality and cultural norms, it was necessary that rhetoric about birth control or reproductive organs be euphemistic. Also, there were few other sources that all women would have had access to, regardless of means. Advertising afforded a sense of equality because it was accessible to all through mass marketing and media. Advertisers did seek out specific populations of women; however, the mass marketing locations of such ads indicates other populations often encountered these messages. A rhetorical analysis of the strategies and conventions used in an effort to persuade women to participate in such behaviors is valuable to scholars of advertising, women's history and birth control.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the field of communication by furthering the inquiry into the rhetoric of women's health and public health. This study examines how

messages about health are constructed, and perhaps received by the public. Additionally, this study can tell us about how messages about health that are euphemistic are constructed and promoted by advertisers.

This study adds to the historical, conceptual and critical narratives of feminine hygiene advertising by addressing the rhetorical strategies that advertisers used. Rhetoric functions as both method and mirror, in that rhetoric can reveal through a methodology of close reading, as well as provide a lens through which to critique ideology and hegemonic dominance. This work seeks to provide further understanding of how euphemistic rhetoric functions to influence the reading of texts by multiple audiences. Lysol's ads were intentionally polysemous to protect the company from legal action, but still were able to convince women to use Lysol as a contraceptive. As a result, this project adds to the body of knowledge about brand segmentation, advertising, and advertising law in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

### *Why Lysol?*

The history of the douche precedes Lysol. In fact, women had been douching for contraceptive and non-contraceptive purposes for quite a long time before Lysol introduced its douching kit. The practice of douching is thought to have originated in ancient Egypt.<sup>43</sup> John Riddle's work on pre-enlightenment birth control practices found that women, and not only elite women, were using herbal methods of fertility reduction as early as 1320.<sup>44</sup> The efficacy of these methods is contested, but it is clear that they were used by women of many classes. Women practicing folk medicine or working as midwives often prescribed herbal douches as a method for treating uterine issues or addressing "blocked menses."<sup>45</sup> Knowledge of folk medicine was passed down from generation to generation from women who trained their replacements, and the

practice of douching was passed along from generation to generation, including recipes for herbal preparations which were widely used.

The familiarity with folk medicine in the U.S. was one reason, perhaps, that so many people were willing to partake in the patent medicine trade. As I explain in more depth in chapter 2, the rise in patent medicine trade gave women more options about what to douche with, but also opened women's bodies to significant harm. The path from herbal folk remedies administered by a midwife to antiseptics peddled by modern manufacturers or patent medicine quacks was marked by the rise of institutional medicine and the American trust in science, which posited that newer, "antiseptic" douches were more effective and safer than older methods. Although the choices available for douching changed over time from homemade herbal remedies to commercially produced and highly advertised options, it is clear that many women were douching to avoid pregnancy. One study of Victorian women from 1863 to 1940 indicated that the douche was the second most used contraceptive method for middle class women.<sup>46</sup> For some perspective on the matter, Dr. Mosher's study found that the most commonly used method of contraception in the Victorian period was withdrawal. While it is alarming from a contemporary perspective to envision a douche as a contraceptive method, it is apparent that many women of this time period did douche and did so for contraceptive reasons. The rise in ads for products that promised "daintiness, cleanliness and general health," promoted douching as a cure all for women concerned about odor, pregnancy, and perhaps even venereal disease. The proliferation of ads for feminine hygiene products drew the attention of advocates for women's health. Rachel Lynn Palmer and Sarah K. Greenberg, a consumer advocate and an M.D. respectively, were so concerned about the use of the douche that they devoted an entire chapter to the douche in *Facts and Frauds in Women's Health*. They explain:



They do their share to swell the chorus which is being raised by the manufacturers of douche powders, in the hope of persuading American women that they should douche as frequently as they wash their faces. That they have been at least partially successful is indicated by reports from doctors that douching has become very prevalent. In the main, there are three parts to the manufacturers' theme song: a douche is necessary for cleanliness; a douche is necessary as a deodorant; a douche is an adequate contraceptive. All three of these contentions are absolutely wrong.<sup>47</sup>

Lysol was only one company among many that offered a douche for sale; however, the Lysol douche is an important example of the power of "feminine hygiene" advertising rhetoric. The Lysol douche ad campaign provides a unique vantage point from which to examine U.S. birth control advertising in the 1920s and 1930s. Lysol straddled the fine line of the commercial and the scientific with its claim to "antiseptic" qualities and "physician testimonials." Capitalizing on the growing medicalization of U.S. culture, Lysol was the first company to advertise its product for feminine hygiene purposes, beginning with the first ad in the Sears catalog in 1911, which included a kit for douching complete with a glass bottle and rubber tubing.<sup>48</sup> Lehn and Fink, later proprietors of Lysol, were pioneers in advertising for feminine hygiene. The history of the term "feminine hygiene" is tied directly to this early advertising. As noted by advertisers themselves, the feminine hygiene euphemism was both profitable and discreet.<sup>49</sup> The Lysol douche was only one of many products that were advertised ambiguously as "feminine hygiene." Lehn and Fink's advertising campaign is notable because of the length of its campaign and because of the different rhetorical strategies it used. Amy Sarch describes the Lysol feminine hygiene approach to advertising:

The ads followed the same basic pattern. They created a dramatic scenario between a woman and her doctor, friend, husband, or daughter that provided reasons for using the product- i.e. (sic) the importance of health, romance and youth, then presented their product as the solution to all social and physical ailments. The ads always included coupon offers for a detailed informative booklet written by a woman doctor, assured to arrive in a plain, brown "social correspondence" envelope. The booklets offered scientific advice, "frank as a physician's instructions and just as impersonal." They promised to

answer “those intimate questions you would like to ask [your physician] in person...” Just like a doctor’s advice, but with one important exception- advertisers promised that their booklets were written in clear, easily understood language.<sup>50</sup>

Lehn and Fink’s advertising product line included print ads for Lysol, as well as radio ads for “Formula L-F,” a contraceptive jelly.<sup>51</sup> However, advertising for Lysol was more prevalent and widespread than any other product used for feminine hygiene in this time period. Ads for Lysol appeared in many different women’s magazines of the time period, including *McCall’s*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Hearst’s Cosmopolitan*, and *True Story*. The prevalence of advertising for Lysol is apparent by the lengthy advertising campaign, which ran from 1925 to the 1940s. Lysol had an advantage over other feminine hygiene products in that it could be used for a variety of household purposes, making Lysol more economical than other feminine hygiene products. As Marchand notes, niche advertising and brand differentiation were widely used strategies in this time period, as manufacturers looked for ways to entice consumers to buy more of their products. One of most effective ways to encourage further purchasing was to demonstrate to the consumer that the product had numerous uses.<sup>52</sup> For example, Fleishmann’s yeast is a well-documented case of this type of advertising. Advertisers felt that the market on yeast consumption for bread making was tapped, so they began to advertise Fleischmann’s as a “dietary aid” and encouraged consumers to imbibe yeast raw.<sup>53</sup> Lysol was following this trend in advertising when it began to advertise what had previously been a cleaning product for personal hygiene purposes, including mouthwash, athlete’s foot cure, and douche. Additionally, women could purchase Lysol without any stigma because Lysol was used for washing floors, disinfection, and cleaning as well as douching. Sarch explains, “Lysol ads included feminine hygiene among its uses for as a disinfecting solution ‘for the kitchen, in the toilet, for sweeping, for floors, cellars and dark corners.’”<sup>54</sup> The Lysol douche was one of the most popular and highest grossing forms of birth

control, even though it had an extremely high failure rate and often was the cause of physical harm to women.<sup>55</sup>

Lysol ads are particularly compelling because of the timing of the ads themselves. Lysol had become a household name through advertising campaigns that explicitly tied use of Lysol to hospitals. However, by the 1920s Lysol was engaged in advertising that represented a change from previous advertising methods, engaging in advertising not just to sell hospital grade floor cleaner, but to sell modernity through aspirational visuals and as explicit tie to science in their ads. Roland Marchand explains that the 1920s ushered in a significant change for American society in advertising, as advertisers became heralds of modernity, informing the U.S. public of the economic modernization possible through consumer behavior.<sup>56</sup> This was also true of advertisers who sold “feminine hygiene” products, including Lysol. In the 1920s and 1930s, the U.S. understanding of birth control was changing. The Comstock Act of 1873 had “defined contraceptives as obscene and inaugurated a century of indignities associated with birth control’s illicit status.”<sup>57</sup> After the passage of the Comstock Act, several states also followed by passing their own laws banning contraceptives as indecent.<sup>58</sup> This created a market for the control of fertility that was entirely unregulated and often resulted in products that were ineffective at the least, and damaging to health and fertility at the extreme. However, birth control pioneers like Margaret Sanger were advocating for birth control to be legalized and for women to control their reproductive destinies. One of the strategies that birth control advocates used was the purification of birth control through the medicalization of contraceptive use. Advocates felt that if birth control were a medical issue, as opposed being connected with “snake oil” sales pitches, it would clean up the U.S. perception of birth control in general. Further, the medical establishment recognized that requiring women to see their physicians for birth control would provide

additional reasons for women to seek medical care, which of course doctors would profit financially from.

### **Research Questions**

This dissertation addresses key questions about advertising, euphemistic rhetoric, and the regulations that did or did not protect the bodies of women who used Lysol as birth control in the early twentieth century. The confluence of social norms, legislation, and the growing advertising market are prime locations to look for the experience of women's attempts at pregnancy prevention and the products that claimed to provide "protection." Through close examination of the Lysol ad campaign, I address the following research questions: How did the Lysol campaign use euphemism and aspirational marketing to sell a product that was officially not for sale in the U.S? How did some women know to read between the lines of euphemistic ads? What rhetorical strategies did Lysol use to convince women of the trustworthiness of its product? How did these rhetorical practices inform and also misinform women who purchased feminine hygiene products? How did Comstock restrictions on obscenity and birth control actually function to create more a dangerous market for consumers? How did images and messages about the ideal wife and mother, according to the Lysol campaign, reveal cultural friction about those roles for U.S. women? What strategies did the Lysol ad campaign use to exploit women's justifiable fears of pregnancy to sell more product? How did the U.S. culture of physician exceptionalism come to be coopted by advertisers for products that were supposedly not for sale? How did the language of science and bacteriology by advertisers play into perceptions of medicine on the part of the general public? How did the desire to achieve economic independence and fertility limitation work against women in the selection of products marketed as feminine hygiene?

## Literature Review

This project encompasses a broad time period, as well as several topics that have been previously studied by scholars. Therefore, I address the relevant issues of the history of women and birth control, the medical and legislative history of consumer protections in the U.S., and the history of advertising to women below. This project required a good command of literature in three areas, as well as literature related to rhetorical methods. First, this project required an examination of resources about the socio-cultural currents of the lives of U.S. women in the 1920s and 1930s, including social movements about birth control, women's rights and attitudes toward sexuality. A thorough understanding of the history of birth control and public health in this time period is needed to provide context for these issues. Second, I provide historical background on advertising, especially advertising to women and advertising on hygiene. Additionally, I address justification of advertising as the medium through which to view women's attitudes about sexuality and fertility control. These issues are complex and often overlapping.

### *Scholarship on Birth Control Advertising*

The struggle for legal and effective birth control in this country has been marked by and intertwined with the rise of advertising.<sup>59</sup> The Comstock Act, which provided legal repercussions for "obscene" texts, required that many who communicated about birth control or venereal disease do so in an ambiguous and often euphemistic way, especially in published advertisements. The need for ambiguity in matters of sexuality in the U.S. has been documented by Robin Jensen in her work about the rhetoric of Progressive Era sexual education advocates. While Jensen's work is not centered around the advertising of birth control, her work provides

important rhetorical context by acknowledging the legacy of rhetorical ambiguity on sexual matters in the U.S. Jensen explains, “Ambiguous language continues to serve as the foundation for many conversations about sexual health.”<sup>60</sup> While Jensen’s work is focused on Progressive Era sexual education, her work directly speaks to the phenomenon of euphemistic advertising for sexually related matters, for the work of sex educators in the Progressive era helped to pave the way for advertisers through use of ambiguous rhetoric.<sup>61</sup> Advertisers were able to convince women to use their product both because of the lack of sexual education, but because women were used to euphemistic messages about sex and therefore may have been predisposed to accept euphemistic messages about feminine hygiene products.

The language of birth control in advertisements is also taken up in Amy Sarch’s work on birth control rhetoric. Sarch argues that the medicalization of birth control was an attempt to “purify” birth control and neutralize the moral issues raised by opposition to birth control access. Sarch examines the power of words to socially construct meaning in birth control history. Her focus is on the medical community more than on the advertising community, but she notes that advertising for birth control was one of the factors that allowed medicalization of birth control in the first place:

Birth control advertising threatened the birth control movement by symbolically inverting the arguments presented by birth control advocates. The advertisers created an alternative to “professional” norms and values and they questioned the usefulness and the absoluteness of the “expert’s” ordering. The ads transgressed the boundaries between “clean” and “dirty” and mixed the opposites together. For instance, Lehn and Fink’s series on “eminent women physicians” advised the women reader on feminine hygiene. Ads featured “doctors” presenting scientific information; scientific and commercialized information mingled without distinction. The law permitted “feminine hygiene,” why did advocates consider “feminine hygiene” and not birth control “dirty”? Lysol ads resembled other advertised luxury products: was Lysol an extravagance or a medical necessity?<sup>62</sup>

These products certainly raised questions about what advice women should follow and what birth control meant in the context of feminine hygiene. Sarch's work is more focused on language use within a broader societal context, but still raises the question of how women read such ads. Her work illuminates the problems that these ads raised for birth control advocates and for women who were unable to decipher this "scientific" information. Further, the work of Robin Jensen notes that the suppression of sexual materials and education for women of this time period was problematic and perhaps harmful.<sup>63</sup> However, the lack of credible information did not stop women from seeking to control their fertility in a number of ways.

Control of fertility for U.S. women was a hotly debated and often harmful bodily endeavor for the women, as is demonstrated by the work of Andrea Tone. Tone's *Devices and Desires* stands as the germinal work on birth control history in the United States. Tone acknowledges that scholars often frame the history of birth control as the province of doctors, lawmakers and activists, but her work asks us to consider the technological and industrial as part of the story of U.S. contraceptives, including the work of the advertising agencies who helped to sell contraceptives to American women. Tone's work focuses on reproductive and contraceptive technologies and provides archival evidence about the history of contraception technologies. Tone argues that historically contraceptives have been an area of entrepreneurship and that legality was not a factor in availability, especially during the Comstock era. Her work traces the "story of what it was like to make, buy, and use contraceptives during a century when the contraceptive industry was transformed from an illicit trade operating out of basement workshops and pornography outlets to one of the most successful legitimate businesses in America history."<sup>64</sup> For example, Tone explores the Lysol douche as one of the "feminine hygiene" products that was part of a record "250 million dollars in sales" in one year from such

items.<sup>65</sup> Tone argues that in ads for the Lysol douche and similar feminine hygiene products, “[advertisers] celebrated the tremendous ‘power’ women wielded in the contraceptive market. Women who heeded physicians’ advice and purchased “scientific” birth control were intelligently harnessing the advances of modern medicine to promote their own liberation.”<sup>66</sup>

Lysol, and similar products such as the Zonite douche, routinely used actors to pose as physicians in their ads so women could feel that they were “scientific products.” Also, the availability of products was tantamount to their success. The mass marketing of these products made them available at five and dime stores, as well as making them extremely profitable for retailers to stock. Tone notes that advertisers “flood[ed] a wide array of commercial outlets with their merchandise, companies guaranteed that contraceptives became a commodity within everyone’s reach. Condoms were sold in locations where men were most likely to congregate; women were targeted in more conventional settings- in stores and in the home.”<sup>67</sup> The availability of such products made them accessible and, often cheap, for those looking to control fertility. Tone’s work explicates that women were often making choices about products that affected their fertility from little to no actual information, but instead from the sales pitches of companies such as the Dilex company, which hired women with no medical background and dressed them as “nurses” to sell Dilex door to door. “Despite their lack of credentials, however, newly hired saleswomen were instructed to assume the role of the medical professional, a tactic the [company] reasoned would gain customers trust, respect, and dollars.”<sup>68</sup> Tone’s work covers a wide swath of history and her focus is not entirely on Lysol, but on the development and sales of contraceptive items up through the Dalkon Shield (an IUD that harmed many women) in the 1980s. Tone’s historical narrative is important for understanding the importance of, and the struggle American women faced for safe contraceptive technologies.



Finally, the context of the Lysol advertising campaign in the interwar time period is well documented by Kristin Hall. Using archival sources, Hall argues that a confluence of emerging modernity and focus on consumer psychology in advertising in the U.S. and Canada allowed Lysol to become the most profitable over-the-counter contraceptive of the time period. Hall provides a history of the cultural context of the Lysol campaign in which she posits that Lysol used euphemistic language and emotional appeals to sell the Lysol douche. She argues that historical context of the Lysol case is necessary for understanding the emotional appeals of the ads directed at women. Hall posits that Lysol relied on fear appeals to sell the douche. She further argues that Lysol capitalized on the fears of women, specifically the fear of aging, loss of beauty, marital disunity, and maternal morality to sell its product. This fear, according to Hall, was a motivator for women to buy Lysol.

While Hall's study provides a rich tapestry of context for the Lysol case, I argue that much more can be learned about the ads themselves through a rhetorical analysis that accounts for both the textual and visual appeals of Lysol's ads. Hall does provide a cursory textual analysis of Lysol's ads, but the aim of her work seems much more focused on an archival history afforded through her work with the American Medical Association (AMA) archives. Further, I argue that Lysol did not create the fear of premature aging or maternal death, instead they exploited these pre-existing fears as part of an aspirational campaign to sell Lysol. Hall posits that Lysol appealed to "white, literate, married, Anglo-saxon, middle class female consumers," but this narrow focus elides that many of the ads that Lysol produced were intended to be aspirational and appeal to women who were immigrants or those who were not middle class, but hoped to be.<sup>69</sup> The issue of literacy is also a problematic concept given that many of the women of lower classes were no doubt literate during this time period. Lysol's underlying motive for any

ad was profitability, so while their ads may have been designed to appeal to the mainstream, it is unnecessarily limiting to say that ads only appealed to only white, middle class women, who likely had resources to purchase other forms of birth control if they desired, instead of all women who aspired to lead the kinds of lives that Lysol depicted. Given the placement of ads in many types of publications, it is not unthinkable that Lysol was advertising to many types of women. While the douche was a popular form of birth control for all women, the economic realities of many African American women's lives necessitated that even after more effective and legal forms of birth control became available, the practice of douching was still used widely in the African American community.<sup>70</sup> Jessie Rodrique notes that studies from the 1930s indicate that black heterosexual couples used the douche as a preferred method of birth control.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, it is worth noting that Lysol did not only appeal to married women or women who wished to avoid pregnancy; rather their ads may also have appealed to women who wished to avoid transmission of venereal disease and those who believed that Lysol was a necessary deodorant product for a part of their body that American culture taught women was particularly shameful.

The history of contraceptive advertising has been well documented in some ways, but need remains for the type of analysis that focuses more specifically on the visual and textual appeal of ads that Lysol was creating in this time period. Women were not only influenced by changing societal norms, and the rise of industry and advertising, but they were also targeted in particular ways by feminine hygiene advertisers, including Lysol. Contraceptive advertising continues to be an area that can inform scholars about the lived experiences of women, and the history that allowed these products to proliferate.

## *Advertising*

The burgeoning field of advertising also had significant influence on U.S. culture and society. In *Advertising the American Dream*, Roland Marchand argues that advertising in the early years was not authentic and uncomplicated, but instead was a reflection of values and attitudes about American life.<sup>72</sup> In *Creating the Corporate Soul*, Marchand argues that the rise of public relations did more to skew the American dream to the desires of corporations than advertising.<sup>73</sup> Inger Stole adds to understanding about how U.S. culture was changed by advertising as well.<sup>74</sup> With particular focus on consumer advocates, Stole interrogates the American relationship with advertising for the 1930s and today. As Stole reports, consumerism in this time period played a significant role in how advertising was viewed. Consumerism became a force that advertisers fostered through ads that equated the American dream, democratic behavior, and consumer patterns. Charles McGovern also picks up the narrative of American democratic ideals through consumer culture.<sup>75</sup> He explains that the notion of American citizenship as constituted through consumerism was built on advertising that played to nationalist ideals and politics. Leslie Hahner also invokes the language of nationalism to explain how American mainstream culture in the progressive era “educated” those thought to be outsiders.<sup>76</sup> Additionally, Lizabeth Cohen explores the American nature of consumerism. She points to the changing relationships of Americans with their government as the lens of advertising and corporations colored the interactions. She argues that the cultural zeitgeist of American democracy has been changed irrevocably by mass consumption.<sup>77</sup>

Several works focus exclusively on advertising to women in this time period. Luigi and Alessandra Manca point to a direct link between gender and the American dream in *Gender and Utopia in Advertising*. Manca and Manca argue that women were targeted as the primary

consumers of goods. Advertisers purposely focused on advertising to women in this time period through a variety of techniques, but advertisers (a male dominated profession at this time) felt that women were overly emotional, lacked logical reasoning skills and could not be counted on to make rational decisions.<sup>78</sup> This is quite clear in the advertising copy and “fluffy” ads of the time period that spoke down to women and/or tried to attract women by false promises and “empowerment” messages. Additionally, Diane Barthel focuses on advertisers’ aim of selling identity to women. She argues that women are not sold only products but brand identity in the products that they purchase.<sup>79</sup> Cynthia Lee Henthorn argues that women were targeted as primary purchasers in the household and therefore marketed to as a target population.<sup>80</sup> As the progressive movement began to concern itself with the hygiene of America and its people, Henthorn notes that advertisers preyed upon the fears of women who feared being perceived as in poverty or dirty.<sup>81</sup> This view of hygiene as the “path to social (or moral) salvation” played into the fears of the growing middle class and the xenophobia that was rampant across the country.<sup>82</sup> Advertisers played into these fears by creating numerous products for hygienic purposes, such as deodorants, mouthwashes, toothpastes, and soaps.<sup>83</sup> Some advertisers even went so far as to invent conditions that people would need to correct with their product, such as halitosis, a fake “condition” in which people “suffered” from bad breath.<sup>84</sup> Fear appeals often targeted women, who were seen as the primary consumers. In addition, advertisers pushed a model of consumption on women in which they promoted consumption as liberation.<sup>85</sup> Women were encouraged to see their role as consumer as one in which they were able to be liberated from the drags of life and able to make their family happy and healthy; the consuming of goods was sold as a patriotic duty of women everywhere. As Tone notes, “The advertising industry, manufacturers, retailers and political leaders provided a concomitant cultural ethos, that

celebrated the emancipating properties of consumption; the power to purchase was lauded as desirable, deserved and quintessentially American freedom. Women became favored recipients of this self-congratulatory encomium.”<sup>86</sup>

Ads were aimed at women for all sorts of products, particularly hygiene and feminine hygiene products. As Sharra Vostral notes, advertising and consumption played a large role in how women felt about menstruation and their bodies, as well as how they handled the “inconvenience of the curse.”<sup>87</sup> Vostral theorizes that “scientific menstruation” was the product of both the medical community and product advertisers. Finally, the work of Amy Sarch focuses on ads for birth control through the lens of biopower and Foucaultian analysis. While she does include the Lysol corpus of feminine hygiene ads in her work, Sarch’s dissertation focuses more broadly on all contraceptive advertising in the 1920s and 1930s to “analyze the history of the birth control movement as a communication process where advocates dissociated sex from “birth control” information to convince the medical profession and legislators that “birth control” deserved legal protection.”<sup>88</sup> Sarch notes that narratives of birth control are socially constructed and are affected by the lens of history.<sup>89</sup> In her historical overview of birth control advertising, Sarch notes that birth control went from “dirty” advertising to medically administered in a short period of time. Because of this period of changing norms, the meaning of birth control has changed considerably over time, indicating that the practice of birth control has changed substantially as well.<sup>90</sup> Once considered an impropriety of commercial advertising, birth control was sanctified by the intervention of the medical community and addition of scientific backing. Birth control advocates and the medical community, both of whom were opportunistic in their aims, supported this move.

## Method and Procedure

The methodology of this dissertation involved visual and textual analysis of the Lysol ads. The goal of this project was to analyze the ads in order to make an argument about the euphemistic rhetoric employed in their construction. I collected a variety of ads from several women's magazines, and found a variety of publications that ran the ads. For this project I decided to use Lysol ads that ran in *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* (or, *Cosmopolitan*) and *McCall's* magazines. For the purposes of this project, I collected 92 ads from the 1922- 1935 issues of *McCall's* and *Hearst's*. The reason for restricting my inquiry to these publications is that both publications ran the ads for a significant period and were one of the primary places that Lehn and Fink chose to advertise consistently. Also, *McCall's* and *Hearst's* were publications aimed at the U.S. middle class that would have been accessible to a large audience. The expense of ads in these publications, as well as the reputation of the magazine themselves, may have also added to the credibility of the Lysol douche. Although the ads also ran in pulp magazines such as *True Stories*, these publications did not have the wide circulation rate of these two publications.

*McCall's* was founded by James McCall, a Scottish tailor, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1870. The goal of the original magazine was to feature sewing patterns that women could make at home. The magazine saw many editor and format changes after McCall's death and was eventually incorporated in New York in 1893.<sup>91</sup> *McCall's* grew substantially after relocating to New York. By 1910, the magazine had a circulation of over 1 million, by 1927 circulation exceeded 2 million and advertising income was \$6,265,000.<sup>92</sup> From a small sewing magazine, *McCall's* became a nationally known and read magazine that at one time featured a serialized

version of Eleanor Roosevelt's memoirs, as well as possessed branch offices on the east and west coasts. *McCall's* was the first national women's magazine to feature branch offices.

On the other hand, the founder of *Cosmopolitan* could not have been further from an immigrant tailor. William R. Hearst became famous for his publishing antics and for his wealth acquired through newspaper and magazines. Throughout Hearst's lifetime he had ownership of a variety of publications, including newspapers and periodicals. Hearst acquired *Cosmopolitan* in 1905, and went to work transforming it into one of the highest circulated magazines in the U.S. While Hearst's legacy may be more related to sensationalism, Theodore Peterson notes, "although his newspapers were aimed at the lowest of common denominators, several of his magazines were edited for upper class or highly specialized markets."<sup>93</sup> The cost of *Cosmopolitan* was higher than many national magazines at thirty-five cents, and the writing and editorial staff was said to "pride itself on the quality of its audience."<sup>94</sup> The higher cost of *Cosmopolitan* did not seem to dissuade buyers, as *Cosmopolitan* reported a circulation of close to 1,700,000 in 1920. By 1925, *Cosmopolitan* had absorbed *Hearst's International* and added to its circulation numbers.<sup>95</sup> The wide circulation of each of these magazines makes them good choices for study because they were broadly read by the American public and would have been places that reputable advertisers would have placed ads to be seen by many Americans. Due to the national reputations of the magazines, they may have been seen as trustworthy places for information. The national brands that advertised in these magazines paid a premium for ad space. Additionally, because some of the more established magazines openly rejected ads for patent medicines, including *McCall's* in the 1930s, the nature of *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* magazine, which was newer and therefore more dependent on advertiser revenue, provided a unique venue for more controversial ads that continued into the 1950s.

After gathering the 92 ads, I identified three categories that organically emerged from the corpus of ads: “motherhood,” “marriage,” and “science.” These three categories tell us quite a bit about changes perceived by advertisers over time in their intended audience. The “motherhood” ads were the first chronologically and show that the advertisers were fairly stereotypical in the way that they tried to appeal to women. However, the addition of the two other categories shows that advertisers changed their pitch in response to a perceived shift in women’s understanding and/or buying habits.

## **Overview of Chapters**

This dissertation is organized by case studies. The first two chapters (including this one) provide context for the studies of the ads, and are followed by three case studies of differently-themed ads. A final chapter provides a conclusion and future directions for research. Chapter two offers an overview of U.S. women’s history in the 1920s and 1930s. A contextualization of the history of birth control, as well as the women’s rights movement, provides necessary background for understanding the context of the Lysol ads. The women’s movement was a primary motivator of the “voluntary motherhood” movement, although not all women in the movement agreed. However, the notion of “voluntary motherhood” and desire for contraceptive materials can be traced to the women’s movement. This chapter includes information about consumer groups that lobbied for greater protection for citizens against fraudulent companies and goods, as well as an overview of the legislation that governed company behavior, advertising and consumer protections. Chapter three addresses the “motherhood” Lysol douche ads. These ads played into the changing zeitgeist of the social conventions of women’s agency toward pregnancy avoidance. I provide a close reading of the ads to examine how and why euphemistic advertising



was used, and how the polysemous ads functioned rhetorically. My analysis of the ads shows that the ads admonished women to stay young for their children and husbands, urged them to protect important women in their lives from too many pregnancies, and used the role of “daughter” as a foil for societal pressures felt by their mothers. Chapter four focuses on Lysol douche ads that address marriage. In my analysis I show how Lysol used both positive and negative visualization and so-called “advice” from doctors to show women that avoiding pregnancy was the key to a happy marriage. A fifth chapter focuses on the “science” ads. These ads relied on the authority of fictional “prominent European physicians,” and the language of bacteriology and public health to convince women that the Lysol douche was medically safe. Finally, the last chapter of the dissertation provides a conclusion, while at the same time looking ahead to how these advertising methods have influenced our attitudes about birth control and women’s bodies in the present, and how these methods may be deployed in the future.

The Lysol campaign provides a compelling view into the ways that advertisers addressed women during the period of Comstock. Advertising addressed to women often demonstrated that advertisers valued the purchasing power of women, but thought little of the actual women charged with making decisions for their households. Women were caught in a bind in which advertisers told them that consumption would liberate them, but the liberation promised was only available to certain groups of women and even then was tied to social pressure and economics. The false promises of consumption did not help women to achieve liberation as home or in society. The struggle for birth control raised issues for women and for U.S. society that were complex and wide-reaching, and the push for voluntary motherhood unintentionally created space for advertisers to exploit the fears of women who felt that they could not or would not ascend the rungs of social class without the help of consumerism. Inaction on the part of the

medical profession and lax consumer protections, joined with a growing rejection of religious ideals in the U.S., created a space for advertisers to exploit the politics of birth control to make a profit. The history of birth control and patent medicine is fraught with legislative struggles and commercial fraud.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> "RB history," Reckitt Benckiser Group, <http://www.rb.com/RB-worldwide/RB-History>. (Accessed August 7, 2012).
- <sup>2</sup> "Lehn and Fink Attractive?" *Barron's*, September 16, 1929, 19.
- <sup>3</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 16-18.
- <sup>4</sup> Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 79-83.
- <sup>5</sup> McGovern, *Sold American*, 61-95.
- <sup>6</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 96-131.
- <sup>7</sup> Oscar A. Bourgeault, "The Feminine Hygiene Question," *The U.S. Journal of Nursing* 56.8 (August 1956): 1021-22.
- <sup>8</sup> Mary Ellen Waller-Zuckerman, "'Old homes, in a City of Perpetual Change:' Women's Magazines, 1890-1916," *Business History Review* 63.4 (Winter 1989): 715-57.
- <sup>9</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 335-63.
- <sup>10</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 66-69.
- <sup>11</sup> Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography* (New York: Dover Press, 2004).
- <sup>12</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 1-24.
- <sup>13</sup> Earl L. Koos, "Class Differences in the Employment of Contraceptive Measures" *Human Fertility* 12 (1947): 99.
- <sup>14</sup> Ernest J. Wraga, "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History," in *Landmark Essays in Public Address*. ed. Martin Medhurst. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 29.
- <sup>15</sup> Kent Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62.1 (1995): 19-47.
- <sup>16</sup> Eve Weiderhold, "Form is a Feminist Issue," in *The Responsibilities of Rhetoric*, eds. Michelle Smith and Barbara Warnick (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2010), 67.
- <sup>17</sup> John Fiske, "Television: Polysemy and Popularity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3 (1986): 391-408.
- <sup>18</sup> Martha Solomon, "The Things We Study: Texts and their Interactions," *Communication Monographs* 60 (1993): 62-68.
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- <sup>37</sup> For more information about birth control as a separate genre of advertising, see the work of Amy Sarch, Andrea Tone, and Paula Treichler.
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- <sup>43</sup> Shirley Green, *The Curious History of Contraception*, 1-24.
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- <sup>65</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 151.
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- <sup>83</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 335-64.
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## Chapter 2

### Why “Feminine Hygiene?”

Women who entered a drug store between 1920 and 1935 would have been confronted with numerous items that fell under the “feminine hygiene” moniker. This term was employed by advertisers for a variety of products related to women’s reproductive lives. These products included vaginal jellies, douches, menstrual technologies, and other patent medicine formulations that were advertised as cures for “female ailments.” These products were part of the panoply of patent medicine products that provided great profits to manufacturers and little to no relief to the user. As Rachel Lynn Palmer and Sarah Greenberg explain, the feminine hygiene phenomenon was rooted in American Puritanical attitudes toward sex and reproduction, and a lack of reproductive knowledge on the part of women who sought relief from these ailments.<sup>1</sup> Advertisers and manufacturers exploited U.S. women’s confusion about their own bodies and manipulated women’s fears of being seen as dirty or overly fecund. The rise in these products during the 1920s was tied directly to legislation that banned information about contraception from the public and to the growing body of advertising that told women that they needed to participate in advertised methods to avoid pregnancy, odor, or disease, among other stated uses. Advertisers posited the dissolution of marriages, unsatisfactory social standing, and even death would be the result for women who did not adequately engage in feminine hygiene. Women were often admonished by advertisers that they would suffer greatly from failing to engage in hygiene practices for their vagina and reproductive tract. These ads often warned women that dire consequences would arise from not injecting their genitals with caustic solutions, ignoring that women had lived and produced children for centuries without the aid of chemical companies. An ad from Septigyn tablets, a feminine hygiene product, provided an extreme

cautionary tale in their ads in which they stated, “it is almost certain to end in death. Sometimes the sufferer becomes insane but frequently falls into decline, and dies of consumption.”<sup>2</sup> These practices were often built on growing hygiene routines that U.S. women were already familiar with, including the use of cosmetics and deodorants for their bodies. Palmer and Greenberg explain, “The douche powder manufacturers, no matter how badly they may want to cut each other’s throats in private, present a united front to the public with their battle cry of the ‘deodorizing douche’- thus capitalizing on the ‘B.O.’ fear already so well established.”<sup>3</sup>

Advertisers were working to install in U.S. women the idea that they needed these products to be part of modern society. The term “feminine hygiene” became a catch-all for any product that dealt with women’s bodies, especially with reproduction or with the genitals. Feminine hygiene product producers were exploiting a cultural moment in which women had little knowledge about their bodies, the Comstock Act provided incentive for manufacturers to be euphemistic about their products, and women had little to no recourse against manufacturers who harmed them due to lax consumer laws in the U.S.

In this chapter, I address the history of women’s fight to control their reproductive destinies and the social reform movements that marked the path to the eventual legality of birth control in this country, including the confluence of race, class, and gender. The increase of venereal disease and the growing concerns of the medical community about protecting wives and children, which passed during birth from mother to infant, from sexually transmitted diseases played a key role in the social transformation of the U.S. medical system. I review the key figures of the time period, their contributions, the social norms that guided them, and the historical events that steered how women and birth control were connected. I also address the sexual norms and the medical technologies that made the quest for birth control possible, as well



as the impact of race on the push to control fertility. Further, I address the influence of the patent medicine market and the development of “feminine hygiene” products that were sold to American women. This chapter addresses the ways that cultural influences made it possible for a product like the Lysol douche to be widely sold to U.S. women, even as the product was recognized by the medical community as harmful to women’s health. I address the societal norms and pressures of this time period with regard to women’s sexuality. I also examine the norms of motherhood and reproduction from a societal standpoint. I interrogate the influence of advertising and the patent medicine market to influence women’s acceptance of potentially deadly products. Finally, I draw connections between this historical context and the history of advertising to women, particularly in relation to the Lysol douche ads as a significant representation of how ads could have been read differently based on cultural context.

### **Birth Control History**

The quest to control fertility is a human concern predating biblical times.<sup>4</sup> In her comprehensive “prehistory” of birth control in the United States, Linda Gordon comments that before the advent of modern agrarian societies, the practice of birth control was widespread. The move toward controlling fertility in the United States has been interlaced with social reform movements.<sup>5</sup> These movements were influenced by social understandings of race, class and gender, but also by the fear of “race suicide” and the burgeoning eugenics movement. In the early nineteenth century, the use or dissemination of birth control was a “criminal” enterprise. Historian Leslie Reagan’s work on abortion informs scholarly understandings of criminality and reproduction in the United States. As she explains, abortion was not always criminal; historically women did not consider themselves pregnant until “quickening,” or the ability to feel the baby

move in the womb.<sup>6</sup> In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, women often took herbs or prepared drugs to induce abortions before the third month, or “quickening.” Women took abortifacients for “blocked menses,” or the absence of regular cyclic menstruation, which was indicative of early pregnancy.

According to Reagan, white, married, upper and middle class women were the primary purchasers of such products.<sup>7</sup> The practice was so widespread that an industry to manufacture these products was openly acknowledged and items were legally traded.<sup>8</sup> It was not until the bid for medicalization of women’s bodies that abortion and other contraceptive measures became suspect. As Reagan writes, “In 1857, the newly organized AMA initiated a crusade to make abortion at every stage of pregnancy illegal. The antiabortion campaign grew in part, James Mohr has shown, out of regular physicians’ desire to win professional power, control medical practice and restrict their competitors, particularly Homeopaths and midwives.”<sup>9</sup> The eventual shift from more nomadic conditions to the stable life of sedentary farming allowed, and also required, much larger families for extra labor. Additionally, although higher birth rates previously had been required to counteract the high rates of infant mortality, advances in medical technology and knowledge meant a lower incidence of infant mortality in the early nineteenth century. These medical advances, along with other economic factors, eventually encouraged smaller families as Americans began to move from rural farms to more urban locales. The desire for smaller families, however, was in direct opposition to ideologies that banned reproductive controls as “criminal,” “unnatural,” or “immoral.”

As Linda Gordon’s work reports, modern Western religions all reported some level of opposition to reproductive control, as well as a Victorian morality that demanded that the purpose of sex was entirely procreative.<sup>10</sup> Victorian emphasis on “respectability” left little

recourse for those who wished to control their fertility by any means besides abstinence. The “cult of motherhood,” as identified by Gordon, established concrete ground rules for women’s lives and actions that were inextricably bound with norms of femininity and Victorian prudery.<sup>11</sup> Shirley Green’s *The Curious History of Contraception* provides an overview of contraceptive technologies, beginning with the ancient Egyptians. She explains that contraception use and norms are based on cultural factors. Green argues that contraception has always been used to varying degrees of success and notes that “the idea of contraception being ‘immoral’ or ‘illegal’ was relatively a new idea in the nineteenth century.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Motherhood and Womanhood: Societal Norms in the Nineteenth Century**

Women have been positioned as mothers, first and foremost, in U.S. history. Sara Evans states the importance of “republican mothers” who upheld the norms of citizenship by selflessly educating and raising their children and waiting on their husbands as important trope in the development of women as citizens during the American Revolutionary period.<sup>13</sup> Beginning in the 1780s, women’s “citizenship” was to be found in producing good citizen sons and marriageable daughters for the state and nation. The role of wife and mother was one that society seemed to assume was a “natural” occupation for women. Additionally, it was often the only available option for most women, as their financial support was tied to either a husband, father, or extended male family members. Many scholars have commented that the cultural notion of motherhood as a “natural” role for women was perhaps a way to keep women subjugated to the power of patriarchal norms.<sup>14</sup> Many of the ideas about women’s place in society at this time period were still tied to the early nineteenth century concept of dual spheres, in which women were relegated to private life as a “protection.” Barbara Welter argues that the “ideal” mother of

the middle class family was predicated on four “virtues”: “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity.”<sup>15</sup>

Beginning in the 1820s, education reformers like Catharine Beecher recommended that women undertake housekeeping as a “domestic science” that included scientific education about pregnancy and childcare.<sup>16</sup> Even though domestic education was promoted, domestic advice manuals still advocated for women to stay at home and out of the public eye or the workforce.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the ideals of “true womanhood” were based on the ideas of femininity that valued delicacy, fragileness, and distance from the public sphere.<sup>18</sup> These ideals of motherhood “embed[ed] motherliness in the very definition of femininity. Maternal virtues justified and idealized the restriction of sex within marriage.”<sup>19</sup> Women were to be sexually pure before marriage and chaste after marriage, even as men were expected to partake in “bachelor life” before marriage and extramarital relations after.<sup>20</sup>

This emphasis on “true womanhood” was predicated on the Victorian notion of separate spheres, in which women were to be seen as domestic (private) and men were public. Women were expected to be subservient to men at home; but the realm of home was under women’s control, including the management of servants and the housekeeping work. Working class men especially were in the precarious position of having a boss who challenged their masculinity at work, which was restored at home by subservient wives and daughters. However, the idea of separate spheres did extend beyond the home for some women who participated in the temperance movement, which was a domestic approach to closing taverns and encouraging sobriety. According to James Reed, the work of women in their domestic and moral superiority, “could eradicate the causes of social disorder, and women necessarily would play the crucial role in the raising of the new generations of free moral individuals because economic change dictated

that men would be away from the home during most of the child's waking hours."<sup>21</sup> According to Evans, this domestic influence also extended to "protection of the home and family from violence, financial irresponsibility, desertion, and immorality associated with drink and male abuse of alcohol."<sup>22</sup> The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), headed by Frances Willard, was one of the largest of these groups.<sup>23</sup> The temperance societies became places where women could work for social change without betraying the norms of femininity. For some groups, these concerns would eventually include suffrage and "voluntary motherhood."

The cult of "true womanhood" did not, however, extend to those women who were not white or could not afford a middle to upper class lifestyle. Women of color or of little means could not meet the demands of "true womanhood" in the eyes of society, regardless of how they may have tried. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains that only white, middle class women were "eligible" for this status, even though all women were subject to these norms. Any woman who could not measure up in terms of wealth, skin color, or status was often not considered a woman at all, but instead as less than human.<sup>24</sup> Women of color, especially, were assumed to have sexual norms that fell outside the realm of true womanhood and understood to be "licentious" and incapable of moral control of their sexuality. Dorothy Roberts explains that black women especially were thought to "transfer a deviant lifestyle to their children that dooms each succeeding generation to a life of poverty, delinquency and despair."<sup>25</sup> Black women were at a significant disadvantage in fighting these stereotypes because their position was seen to be hereditary, as opposed to the result of systematic oppression and poverty. This meant that black women could not participate in the conventions of Republican motherhood or be afforded the same privileges of "true womanhood," as white women were. These gender and race norms were

a part of the cultural expectations that made the fight for birth control an uphill battle for reformers.

### **Reproduction, Birth Control, and Sexual Health**

The question of birth control did not enter the cultural consciousness of the U.S. until a wide shift in sexual, social, and medical norms brought society face to face with a growing urban population and a burgeoning trade in sexual pulp texts and commercial erotica.<sup>26</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz observes that growing concern over the suppression of these types of materials in the Progressive Era was intimately intertwined with concerns over young, male sexuality, especially avoidance of masturbation and the violation of evangelical Christian values.<sup>27</sup> The emerging middle class benefitted from the growing mobility of urban life, but feared for the morality of its children who were beginning to leave home for work or school alone. Social movements in the Progressive Era were spurred by the development of industrial capitalism and the increasing influence of the middle class. Rapid changes from an agrarian society to an industrialized society called into question the Victorian morals many young people had grown up with as they experienced freedom from their families and independent living for the first time. An abundance of leisure time and the availability of mixed gender entertainments were just a few of the reasons that attitudes about gendered relations began to change.<sup>28</sup> One of the most important of these changes would be the development of the companionate marriage, which advocated marriage for love instead of economics, and the resulting changes in attitudes about sex and family size. The move toward smaller families and inclusion of sex as a “right to pleasure” meant that more people were invested in controlling fertility.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, a growing

“health menace” in the form of sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis and gonorrhea added to concerns about sexual health, especially for the medical establishment.

### **Venereal Disease and Sexual Health**

The significant changes of this time period encompassed the role of women changing from “only mothers” to individuals. This change was slowly established, along with the idea that women should be able to control their fertility and reproductive labor through the use of birth control. Changing social conventions and birth control activists, such as Margaret Sanger, had a hand in bringing this significant social change about. The struggle for birth control was not an easy fight, however, and was marked by a cultural and societal struggle that took almost a century. Carole McCann argues that the birth control movement was a force that eventually won the legal use of contraception, but that along the way the need for funding and political allies often led the movement off the beaten path.<sup>30</sup> Due to the nature of contraception and the moral issues involved, many feminist groups were not interested in appearing to support promiscuity or licentiousness.<sup>31</sup> This issue was further complicated by the relationship of many women to the sex act itself; sex carried graver concerns for women who might die in childbirth, as well as widely held beliefs about male sexual irresponsibility and irrepressibility. Many women, including women who advocated for family limitation, subscribed to the philosophy that women could exercise self-control and should also exercise control over men as well. As Janet Farrell Brodie points out, “reproductive control became part of a women’s duty to her family...feminists opened a campaign of moral and peer pressure to sanction women’s control of timing, and also frequency, of sexual intercourse.”<sup>32</sup> The availability of the douche and the new scientific methods of periodic abstinence added to the burden on wives to control fertility. Additionally,

feminists advocated that women continue to practice abstinence to avoid pregnancy, but also to avoid the “violence” of marital relations with men who committed sexual abuses toward their wives. These “abuses” were known to be rough treatment or disregard for the wives’ wishes about sexual contact, but also the spread of venereal diseases to wives from contact with extramarital partners, often prostitutes.<sup>33</sup> As Elmina Slenker, a free love advocate, reported in 1886, “I’m getting a hose of stories about women so starved sexually as to use their dogs for relief, and finally I have come to the belief that a clean dog is better than a drinking, tobacco smelling, venereally diseased man!”<sup>34</sup>

The issue of venereal disease was one that many physicians were confronting as gonorrhea and syphilis spread within families, especially to “innocent” wives and then children through childbirth. Medical science struggled to contain and understand the spread of disease, and to understand the role of physician responsibility to family life. Where previously the confidentiality of such knowledge was kept to the male patient, American physicians grappled with the ethical responsibility to tell wives or future wives about the dangers of infection.<sup>35</sup> The preservation of the nuclear family and the propagation of the species hung in the balance for physicians and medical professionals, especially as there was no known cure for these diseases. The confluence of unchecked male sexual behavior, availability of prostitution, and spread of disease became a public health concern that changed the way physicians saw their role within the community.<sup>36</sup> These changes often put physicians at odds with previously held beliefs about obscenity and public education about sex. While the belief that men contracted the disease from “fallen women” was still prevalent, the intent to protect the “innocent” meant that social reformers began to see the value in public sex education, even if that education was not widely offered or even very accurate.<sup>37</sup> Little thought was given to where these “fallen women” came



from, although it is likely that xenophobic fears played into categorizations of prostitutes as immigrant or foreign-born women. From this social milieu, the social hygiene movement was born. Social hygiene proponents believed in an inextricable relationship between prostitution and venereal disease. The movement championed the idea of the white slave trade, convinced that no (white) women would actively chose a life of prostitution.<sup>38</sup> Social hygiene advocates continued to seek reform of private behavior and public health, often advocating for public sex education efforts even in the face of censorship.

The major players in the struggle for birth control and sexual health were often characterized as radicals and faced a great rhetorical challenge as they fought for birth control and “voluntary motherhood,” especially in the face of anti-obscenity crusaders such as Anthony Comstock. Comstock began his career as a humble dry-goods salesman, but would eventually go on to become a household name.<sup>39</sup> His legacy reverberates today in current censorship and post office laws in the U.S.

### **Comstock and Censorship**

The passage of the Comstock Act by Congress in 1873 officially made the mention of contraceptives obscene and criminalized reformers who sought to provide birth control methods or information through the mail or other means.<sup>40</sup> This act is vitally important to understanding advertising messages that were created in the late 1800s through the 1940s, because it made “obscenity” illegal and punishable by fine or imprisonment. The protectionist stance of reformers, prohibitionists, and revivalist Christian movements was catalyzed through the Comstock Act against common foes, such as the “free love” movement and xenophobic fears of foreign immigrants.<sup>41</sup> Mothers, specifically, were thought to be particularly responsible for the

protection of their children. As anti-vice societies developed to counteract what was seen as negative social forces, many of these groups saw mothers as primary targets for membership and enforcement.<sup>42</sup> These concerns and growing membership ranks helped to pass anti-obscenity regulations, the most famous of which is the 1873 “Suppression of trade in, and circulation of obscene literature and articles of immoral use act,” commonly called the Comstock Act.<sup>43</sup> This definition was particularly vague and applied in an “as the enforcer sees fit” manner.

The turbulent years in which the Comstock Act was passed were marked by the movement of the American population to a more urban sensibility and existence. The perceived loosening of Victorian ideals and standards caused uproar and fear in those who wished to maintain the status quo. The women’s suffrage movement added to the tenor of changing American attitudes through public campaigns that challenged the status quo. The time period was also complicated by the mass arrival of immigrants, who were often seen as both participating in the sexual trade and purchasing sexually explicit materials. The impression was that these materials were becoming more popular and easily accessible, and therefore needed to be controlled through legislative means. Comstock and his allies felt that it was necessary to protect the country from such impurities, and began a crusade to eradicate such materials and “sin” from the American consciousness. Comstock was affiliated with the Christian movement of moral crusade against all sin.<sup>44</sup> This popular movement was in response to a perceived laxity that was taking over American culture, with saloons open on Sunday and easy access to explicit materials. Comstock began his anti-vice crusade by petitioning police to enforce the current laws that forced saloons to close on Sundays.<sup>45</sup> This small task would turn out to be a full-time job by the time that Comstock was finished.

Comstock's job as a dry goods salesman took him into parts of the city that introduced him to the trade in sexual literature, contraceptives and abortion. Appalled, he first tried unsuccessfully to get the police to act against these businesses. Finally, he took matters into his own hands, filing formal legal complaints against what he viewed as obscenity.<sup>46</sup> He published a book called *Traps for the Young* in 1883 to warn against the evils of sexual materials and frequently referred to himself as Satan's enemy.<sup>47</sup> Robin Jensen has pointed out, "Comstock [believed] that any public discourse about sex corrupted the nation's young people and would ultimately lead to the downfall of civilized society."<sup>48</sup> Eventually established as a U.S. postal inspector and leader of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, Comstock spent the majority of his forty-year career fighting the dissemination of printed materials and protecting what he saw as the sanctity of the Christian ideals. Blanchard and Semonche note, "he labeled obscene almost everything that could be read, seen, heard or practiced that did not endorse heterosexual activity within marriage. However, even discussions of marital relations were unacceptable if they were too explicit."<sup>49</sup> The movement to remove offending materials, however, often proved to be counterproductive because prosecuting such materials only increased publicity for them.

The Comstock Act was passed by a Congress in a rush to inaugurate Ulysses S. Grant for a second term and still dealing with the fallout of the Civil War. It passed without fanfare at the end of the congressional term. However, the Comstock Act would come to be at the center of an exploding controversy in this country. It "defined contraceptives as obscene and inaugurated a century of indignities associated with birth control's illicit status."<sup>50</sup> The legal move to define contraceptives as illegal and obscene would have far-reaching consequences for American women. After the passage of the Comstock Act, several states followed suit by passing their own

laws banning contraceptives as indecent.<sup>51</sup> This “problem” was exacerbated by the fact that doctors and nurses were not allowed to give advice to women regarding the spacing of children or the avoidance of pregnancy during the nursing period. The ban on medical advice resulted in many women taking the matter of birth control into their own hands and relying on “mail-order buying and purchases made at pharmacies, five-and-dime stores, gas stations, and vending machines and even door-to-door peddlers.”<sup>52</sup> This created a market for the control of fertility, which was entirely unregulated and often resulted in products that were ineffective at the least, and damaging to health and fertility at the extreme. It is from this problematic and potentially deadly situation for American women that birth control advocates were able to make compelling arguments for birth control reform. One of the best-known, and most controversial, reformers was Margaret Sanger.

### **Sanger and Voluntary Motherhood**

Women who chose to engage in or advocate fertility control were often seen as sex haters or anti-maternal.<sup>53</sup> These messages made it difficult for feminist advocates to overcome the “cult of motherhood” messages that were so popular in domestic advice and women’s magazines. While the feminist movement sought to overcome these messages, it faced a particularly difficult task as it was fighting against what appeared to be an argument based on nature. Prevailing science used eugenic theory, a quasi-scientific movement focused on the control of genetics in human reproduction to control biological inheritance, to argue that women were naturally more suited to childrearing, and that some women were more suited than others, specifically white, Protestant, upper class women. Additionally, the argument for voluntary motherhood was primarily a tool for women to gain marital power, not to avoid marriage or pregnancy entirely.

Voluntary motherhood was not equally available to all women, especially those whose economic circumstances made it unlikely that they would be able to afford the reproductive technologies available or have access to the knowledge of how to correctly use them. Pioneers in the birth control movement such as Margaret Sanger helped to spur changes in American attitudes.

Margaret Sanger was prominent in the U.S. birth control movement, and is credited with coining the term “birth control.”<sup>54</sup> Born in 1879, Sanger was a vocal proponent of women’s rights. She felt that women had the right to control their own destiny and fertility.<sup>55</sup> As a student of the anarchist Emma Goldman, who had been helping to smuggle contraceptives into the country, Sanger became more radical in her political views and began participating in radical labor causes, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).<sup>56</sup> The fight against the anti-obscenity laws for Sanger began in 1912, as she turned her political ambitions to a topic she knew well, family limitation. Trained as a nurse, Sanger was privy to a multitude of stories of women who were injured, maimed or killed due to self-induced fertility control, especially the practice of self-performed abortions.<sup>57</sup> In 1912, she wrote *What Every Girl Should Know*, a series of articles for a socialist daily named *The Call*.<sup>58</sup> The articles offered girls information about their bodies, reproductive organs and sexual health. Sanger officially set out to revolutionize the knowledge to which women had access.

As Jennifer Emerling Bone explains, three dominant publics controlled the dissemination of information about birth control in this time period: the state, the medical community, and the Church.<sup>59</sup> All three of these entities had a vested interest in colluding with the norms of the time and suppressing information about contraception. Margaret Sanger was facing an uphill battle as she struggled to get her message to women. Bone notes that Sanger was rhetorically effective through storytelling and sharing of her personal experiences, in both written and speech

forms. This rhetorical space was especially important for the dissemination of information that was not available to women through other means. Several scholars have written specifically about Sanger's conservatism or desertion of feminist ideals, but the fact remains that her rhetoric is an enduring symbol of the fight for women to take control of the public sphere.<sup>60</sup> As Sara Hayden explains, often the claim of Sanger's desertion of feminist ideals can be drawn back to an underlying assumption about Sanger's feelings about sexuality. However, Hayden argues that Sanger's writings and rhetoric reveal a strategy of "utiliz[ing] this body of discourse to gain legitimacy for her cause while at the same time she attempted to challenge its patriarchal assumptions."<sup>61</sup> As a rhetorical figure, Sanger's work continues to generate controversy and inspire analysis. Whatever her ambitions for reproductive technology and eugenics, Sanger is a pivotal figure in the history of birth control in the United States. In the next section, I examine the history of patent medicine, the lack of U.S. legislation to protect consumers, and the social factors that colluded to make these products extremely profitable, often harmful, and occasionally deadly.

### **Patent Medicine and Consumer Protections**

The history of patent medicine can be traced to Britain in the 1600s, but patent medicines soon made their way to the U.S. and other western nations. The patent medicine market evolved from individuals who made potions and home remedies for close family and friends as part of the practice of healing. These practices were transformed, however, into "get rich quick schemes" of both British and American quacks and pharmacists that proved harmful and often even fatal for those who sought their consult. Nevertheless, the desire for such products was one of the underlying causes of their creation. Oliver Wendell Holmes stated, "the public itself...insists on being poisoned."<sup>62</sup> As James Harvey Young explains: "Medicine taking was a habit deeply

implanted in the human psyche. To fulfill the patient's expectations and bolster his confidence, even cautious physicians prescribed medicines liberally."<sup>63</sup> Medicine was a part of the daily lives of many Americans, from the corner drugstore to the entertainments of traveling medicine shows; the American market was flooded with patent medicines. The proliferation of false medical research and those who claimed medical training on the labels of such products added to the confusion about what the medicines were and how they were prepared. Manufacturers often claimed that the tonics and pills were the result of medical research or the product of a physician. The real ingredients were often more likely to be cheap filler products such as water, baking soda, or sawdust; the active ingredients were often harmful or completely useless altogether. Often composed of ingredients such as strychnine, arsenic, mercury, ammonia, alcohol or opium, patent medicine makers were sometimes more successful at killing consumers or promoting addictions to their products than actually curing an illness. In addition, the prevailing medicine practice in the early 1800s did not provide much confidence or comfort to those who were ill.

James Harvey Young writes:

Patent-medicine promoters belabored regular physicians for murderous bleeding and purging, promising instead swift and sure cures for diseases great and small to be wrought by mild, pleasant tasting remedies. In fact their concoctions were often loaded with opium or alcohol, unbeknownst to the customer, and not infrequently contained much mercury...Orthodox physicians, outraged to the imposture, pointed out the evils of the patent medicine business...such critical voices, however, were buried beneath an avalanche of advertising.<sup>64</sup>

The history of patent medicine is fraught with both consumer activism and get-rich-quick schemes. The advent of advertising created more avenues for manufacturers to sell their products to Americans. Often patent medicine history focuses on those who sold such items and the great wealth producers amassed. However, the history of patent medicine in the U.S. is also entangled with American cultural norms and the developing practices of medicine in this time period.

Consumer advocates and ordinary citizens eventually found themselves squarely in the battle for patent medicine legislation between manufacturers and government. The fight for adequate legislation to protect U.S. consumers would eventually take thirty years and numerous attempts to craft a law that would protect the public and end legislative battles with businesses and advertisers who fought any regulation through lobbying and public campaigns. As Thomas Bailey reports, “exactly 190 measures to protect in some way the consumer of food and drugs appeared in Congress. Of these, eight became law, six passed the House but not the Senate, three passed the Senate, but not the house, twenty-three were reported favorably from the committee to which they has been referred, nine were reported back adversely, and 141 were never heard of after their introductions.”<sup>65</sup> This slow movement related directly to consumer opinion. As public opinion grew more outraged, the pace of legislation quickened. By some accounts, the final straw for American legislators was the American soldiers and veterans who had been poisoned by imported and tainted nostrums and medications, leading to death for many.<sup>66</sup> This was not the first time Americans had been harmed by patent medicines, but the poisoning of soldiers who had served their country brought public opinion to a boiling point. Americans were dismayed at the dangers posed by those profited off the misery of others and the public called for the government to protect citizens from impure food and drugs.

The first law passed to protect consumers was the Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906. Although the law provided fines for mislabeling, the law only focused on labeling and purity; lawmakers did not consider the role of advertising at all. The failure to address advertising left gaps in the bill in which advertisers saw opportunity to continue the practice of false advertising, although with different tactics than before.<sup>67</sup> The act was doubly problematic because it gave the



American public a false sense of security about the products they saw advertised. Inger Stole writes,

Although the Food and Drugs Act of 1906 had made misbranding of foods and drugs illegal, it applied only to labeling and not to general advertising of such products. Adding to this flaw was the law's definition of *misbranding*. Only when brands and labels bore information that was misleading, fraudulent or deceptive could the FTC investigate. The commission could not regulate manufacturers who deliberately omitted key ingredients on their packages and labels or promised consumers unrealistic rewards for their products' use...before the FTC could force a manufacturer to withdraw a misbranded or mislabeled product from the market, numerous consumers might be adversely affected, or even dead.<sup>68</sup>

This gap in consumer protection was taken up by consumer advocates, such as the Consumer's Union (CU). Consumer advocates raised awareness about problematic products and practices, and helped to lobby for increased protections for consumers. As Regina Blaszczyk writes about the consumer movement, "By the mid-20s, a small group of concerned citizens launched a full-scale attack on modern advertising. Earlier reformers had spearheaded legislation on food safety, demanding 'truth in advertising'; the new generation of consumer activists lobbied for national laws to regulate 'business propaganda' ads and warned the public about advertisements that preyed on human weaknesses."<sup>69</sup> The publication of the best-selling *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* brought the Consumer's Union to the attention of those who wished to draft a new law with more protections for consumers.<sup>70</sup> Initially intended as a supplement to the 1906 bill, the Tugwell bill was proposed to "strengthen the government's power to combat public deception in the sale of food, drugs and cosmetics."<sup>71</sup> The bill contained stronger regulations on product labeling and adulteration, as well as provisions to oversee advertising. The bill took a much stronger stance against false advertising. However, the battle over the Tugwell bill itself turned out to be a long, protracted affair, in which

advertising interests, and in some cases members of Roosevelt's administration, fought against the bill with tenacity. Eventually, the bill was worn down by advertising interests, and no longer resembled the original bill in many ways. The Tugwell bill went through four iterations, and yet still had not passed by 1935. In 1937, the Senate once again attempted to revive a final version of the Tugwell bill, but this version was not successful in making it out of committee. Instead, an amended version of the FTC 1914 act was introduced by Clarence Lea, and began to garner attention. Eventually named the Wheeler-Lea Act, Lea proposed that the FTC be given power to monitor all business and advocate against unfair advertising on the part of consumers. Additionally, the Congress passed a new Food, Drugs and Cosmetics Act to strengthen the ability of the FDA to protect consumers. The Wheeler-Lea Act gave the FTC control of advertising and the FDA increased control of labeling and testing of products. The new Food, Drug and Cosmetics act provided warning labels that had to be affixed to "laxatives, nose drops, douches, vermifuges, cough remedies, liniments, pain-killers, tonics, and other popular propriety products."<sup>72</sup> Although the FDA had more power to regulate proprietary products, they were not able to ban the products from the market altogether. The Wheeler-Lea Act is still the primary legislation about advertising in this country. Although the Supreme Court ruled in 1942 that advertising is not protected speech, many of the original loopholes in the Wheeler-Lea bill are still exploited by advertisers today.<sup>73</sup> While Wheeler-Lea was a significant step in protecting U.S. consumers, the law did not stop advertisers from targeting Americans, especially American women, with fear appeals and false promises.

## Women and Patent Medicine

Jackson Lears's *Cultural History of Advertising in America* reports that advertisers played upon the fears and perceived flaws of the American people. He writes, "The desire for a magical transformation of the self was a key element in the continuing vitality of the carnivalesque advertising tradition ...in nineteenth century America."<sup>74</sup> Women especially were promised mystical transformation by advertisers. As women were thought to control household spending, advertisers were eager to get their housekeeping dollars. Women were the primary target of new ads for numerous household cleaners and food items, as advertisers sought to market directly to women who they viewed as the primary decision makers for household goods.<sup>75</sup> So just as women were gaining the vote with passage of the nineteenth Amendment, they were also being targeted by advertisers in numerous ways.<sup>76</sup> Women were particularly targeted as an audience that advertisers thought were unsophisticated and easily manipulated.<sup>77</sup> Advertisers felt that women were overly sentimental and emotional, and therefore created ads that reflected such. Many advertisers treated women and children as the same demographic, producing "collectible trading cards" for products that women often bought, such as pins, needles, and sewing notions. As Laird notes, "That many advertisers did not hesitate to demean large segments of the population, some of whom counted as potential customers, displayed levels of demographic and cultural centrism impervious to self-consciousness or empathy."<sup>78</sup> Women's bodies were often used in ads themselves in ways that would be offensive to women viewers, including showing dress and material goods that were out of reach for most middle class Americans and presenting them as "middle class."<sup>79</sup> Even ads that were not aimed at women often-violated social norms of decorum. Advertisers often placed women in ads dressed as

prostitutes or showed fully naked female forms in ads for men. Advertisers assumed that the only women who would see the ads were those already corrupted (e.g., prostitutes).

Advertisers in this time period were also pioneering new methods to entice women to buy products. Juliann Sivulka describes the new phenomenon of psychological advertising: “The J. Walter Thompson agency pioneered this dramatic shift away from selling goods and services to using well-known psychological devices to lure customers. The agency’s advertisements of such products as Woodbury’s facial soap, Fleishmann’s yeast, Odorono deodorant, Lux Soap, and Pond’s cold cream successfully incorporated fear, sex, and emulation appeals to condition consumers to want the products.”<sup>80</sup> The pharmaceutical and patent medicine manufacturers were also hoping to convince women to part with their money, as they promoted products like Lydia E. Pinkham’s Vegetable Compound and Pond’s Extract. Cure-alls that claimed to cure a variety of diseases were often aimed at women. Women’s bodies were treated by advertisers as needing to be disciplined through the use of substances and devices. The medical community treated women in ways that indicated that they were over-emotional and prone to fits, the Victorian diagnosis of “hysteria” being the literal interpretation of over-emotional. Daniel Delis Hill shares the story from a prominent medical text of a doctor, “who reportedly cured a group of hysterical girls in a female seminary by heating iron instruments before their eyes and telling them that ‘the first one who had a fit should be cauterized down the spine.’ The medical text concluded, ‘They all recovered immediately’.”<sup>81</sup> Women’s issues dealing with reproduction were a particular area of profit for patent medicine makers, as medicine at this time did not provide much relief for women who suffered from “female ailments” and doctors were less than comforting about women’s experiences in many cases.<sup>82</sup> Women’s “delicate constitutions” were often the topic of patent medicine advertisers.

Women were not only patent medicine takers, however; many women were in the business of patent medicine making. Women like Lydia Pinkham became household names, and relied on the stereotype of the mother or grandmother to sell their products. Women were encouraged to write to Lydia with all their “confidential inquiries.”<sup>83</sup> The face of a woman or the image of a grandmother was an oft-used symbol for patent medicine makers. Because many people had turned to their grandmothers for homespun remedies, these products played up the image of safety. “Recipe books” for home remedies were also popular, and the task of making such remedies also fell to women.<sup>84</sup> Advertisers were also prone to taking the tack of guilt toward women, often claiming in advertisements that women whose children were sick had only themselves to blame, and were responsible for not providing the medicine needed to make them feel better. “Mrs. Winslow’s cough syrup” published several ads that were directed at women, usually pamphlets that “interspersed recipes for hotcakes and puddings with shaming denunciations of mothers who didn’t have its soothing syrup on hand.”<sup>85</sup>

Overall, women were seen as easy marks for advertisers, especially patent medicine advertisers. Women were the bodies on which patent medicine makers and advertisers imposed their advertising ideals. Women were reduced to targets and mannequins for advertisements. Advertisers used psychological ploys and guilt tactics to play on women’s fears. Women’s roles, such as mother or grandmother, were often used in advertising to convince the public of the “safety” of the products, as in the case of Lydia E. Pinkham’s vegetable compound. Women also benefitted from the patent medicine advertising directly, as they were sometimes the manufacturers of the products themselves. But, as the Lysol case demonstrates, women were often the ones who endured physical harm and whose bodies were injured by these products.

## The Birth of “Feminine Hygiene”

Advertising scholars have noted the cultural power of advertising during the period following World War I. Roland Marchand’s work *Advertising the American Dream* marks the importance of advertising to the modernization of U.S. society. Advertisers helped to usher in new technologies and to bring progress to the masses. He notes, “modern technologies needed their heralds, advertising men were modernity’s ‘town criers.’ They brought good news about progress.”<sup>86</sup> Advertisers helped to engage in the American public in advances in household technologies, like washing machines and refrigerators, as well as promoting automobiles and large durable goods. One of the biggest tasks U.S. advertisers undertook, however, was introducing the U.S. public to a rising standard of hygiene. Ads for toothpaste, deodorant and soap proliferated in American media. Advertisers were focused on women as the primary decision makers of the household. As Juliann Sivulka explains, “From the very start many admakers recognized that their most important customer was the woman, who controlled the major share of household spending. ‘The proper study of mankind is man’ declared one agency...but the proper study of markets is woman.”<sup>87</sup> Women’s magazines especially took the tack of providing American women with advice about how to promote the hygiene of their homes and families. Changing patterns of population meant that women had less contact with extended family and community to offer advice. “Mobility, greater generational separation, and modern complexities of living had created a vacuum of personal advice. In responding to that need, advertisers explored new ways to personalize their relationship with the consumer.”<sup>88</sup> Advertisers also used the genre of advice giving to convince women that they were providing advice that would keep them from offending others. Sivulka elucidates, “admakers, who considered women more emotionally vulnerable than men, often planted the idea of one of

women's worst fear- that of giving offense- and then exploited it.”<sup>89</sup> This was especially true of products that fell under the feminine hygiene umbrella. Marchand illuminates, “Advertisers also discovered a vacuum of advice in areas in which the delicacy of the topic inhibited person-to-person conversation about offensive personal characteristics or new products for feminine hygiene. Recognizing the implications of the slogan, ‘Even your best friend won’t tell you,’ advertisers of soaps deodorants, pimple preparations, and mouthwashes rushed to offer mass advice in the form of warnings of personal offenses of which the consumer might be unaware.”<sup>90</sup>

Advertisers began to move toward a market segmentation model of marketing in this time period, and several new advertising strategies were employed to market the “differences” among products that were essentially similar.<sup>91</sup> Two of the strategies that advertisers employed were direct marketing to women and market segmentation. Women were the primary target of new ads for numerous household cleaners and food items, as advertisers sought to market directly to women who they viewed as the primary decision makers for household goods.<sup>92</sup> Also, advertisers began to draw connections between consumerism and citizenship, reinforcing the messages of Americans as consumers by “voting” with their dollars.<sup>93</sup> So just as women were gaining the vote through the nineteenth Amendment, they were also being pursued by advertisers who profited by targeting the insecurities of the American public.<sup>94</sup> Women were targeted particularly as an audience that advertisers thought were unsophisticated and easily manipulated.<sup>95</sup> Advertisers felt that women were overly sentimental and emotional, and therefore created ads that reflected such attitudes. Advertisers were nonetheless successful in advertising to women, even if their views of women were simplistic. However, companies and advertisers were also seeking to improve market shares and boost sales numbers, and one of the ways that they did so was through market segmentation. Market segmentation was a way to identify

consumers by social class or other commonalities, and then market a product based on the identified difference. As Lizbeth Cohen explains, “General Motors and other early segmenters tended to vary their products to appeal to different ‘price classes’, income groups that ... were separated more by ability to buy than by taste.”<sup>96</sup> One of the first market segments to occur to advertisers was women, and this set the tone for how advertisers began to modernize their product.

As the advertising boom continued, manufacturers begin to seek different ways to move products off the shelves and into American homes.<sup>97</sup> Companies sought new ways to market products as multi-purpose in order to increase the value or utility of the item in the eyes of the consumer. Advertisers also moved more toward a “niche” market mentality in which marketers advertised one product as having numerous uses, many of them made up by the manufacturer for profit.<sup>98</sup> As I note in chapter 1, this strategy was quite common and was often used for several types of products.

How these feminine hygiene products came to be so popular and their use so widespread, regardless of race or income, is a cause for scholarly concern. The familiarity of the American public with patent medicine was paramount to the practice of using products without medical advice, which extended to birth control as well. While the usage of such products may have been based on an initial comfort with “folk remedy” heritage in the U.S. and Britain, the business of birth control was in full-swing and exceptionally profitable by the early twentieth century. As studies of the time period noted, “the bulk of money spent for contraceptives, probably more than a quarter of a billion dollars annually goes for these ‘feminine hygiene’ products. In general, they are singularly ineffective as contraceptives, being on par with plain water, and may be harmful.”<sup>99</sup> However, the anti-contraception provision of the Comstock Act acted as a catalyst



for feminine hygiene products to become widely popular by stating that products that were sold for reasons *other* than contraception, such as feminine hygiene or protection from diseases, were legal under the law and therefore could be sold in pharmacies and five-and-dime stores where women had the most access to them. This unique situation of legality was one that advertisers were aware of and probably took advantage of, as the number of ads in the 1930s was increasing and the market was ripe with numerous “feminine hygiene” products available through mail order or over the counter. Stores began to install “feminine hygiene” sections with “lady attendants” to answer personal questions in a “discrete” manner.<sup>100</sup> As noted in 1938 by *Fortune Magazine*, birth control was a booming business with over \$250 million in annual revenue.<sup>101</sup>

Advocates like Margaret Sanger were trying to establish a useful, convenient, and safe practice of birth control that had better results than the current products on the market in the 1920s and 1930s by fighting against the obscenity laws that allowed such products to flourish. Additionally, advocates were outraged at the manufacturers claims of “marriage hygiene” and “daintiness” in the ads of this time period. Consumer advocates Rachel Lynn Palmer and Sarah K. Greenberg wrote warning women of the risk not just of pregnancy, but even death from the use of these products. They write, “Lysol is ‘SAFE,’ says the Lehn and Fink Company, makers of the product. It takes more than the word ‘safe’ in capital letters to refute the many cases, in medical literature, of injury and even death from Lysol.”<sup>102</sup> Women who sought to control fertility had little choice but to turn to corporations and advertisers who offered an easily available solution. Many felt that these products were safe because they were widely advertised in leading women’s publications. While consumer advocates and the medical establishment warned against use of these products, desperate women turned in droves to the messages of companies who claimed their products safe and effective. There was little to no consumer

protection against false advertising in this time period, and the euphemistic language of the ads added to the ability of advertisers to make such claims without fear of reprisal. One of the largest players in the feminine hygiene market was the Lysol douche.<sup>103</sup>

### *Lysol*

As the movement toward niche marketing began to grow, Lehn and Fink began to market Lysol for different purposes besides household cleaning. Beginning in 1911, Lysol was imported to the United States by the Lehn and Fink Products Corporation. Lehn and Fink originally advertised Lysol as a household cleaner and disinfectant. Ads for Lysol were aimed at women in different ways. Some ads aimed at nurses informed of the antiseptic benefits of using Lysol in hospitals and for care of patients.<sup>104</sup> One of the most prominent ways that Lysol was advertised in ladies' magazines at this time was as a "feminine hygiene" product, a term which became popular in the early 1900s.<sup>105</sup> The ads for "feminine hygiene" products were a growing trend in the 1920s and 1930s. Manufacturers saw a desire on the part of women to control fertility, and a vacuum in the availability and legality of such products, causing the market to rapidly expand between the 1880s and 1930s.<sup>106</sup> This large growth marked what advertisers saw as an expanding potential market. Manufacturers promoted foaming tablets, jellies, douches (both liquids and powders), suppositories, and even mass-market diaphragms.<sup>107</sup> The douche preparations proved to be the most popular birth control method in the country in this time period. As Andrea Tone indicates, "the commercial douche was the favored contraceptive not only of middle class women, who still made up a majority of birth control users, but of contracepting women of *all* economic classes."<sup>108</sup> The Lysol douche was not just a product that women were encouraged to use by advertisers, but also a product that was covertly being used as a method of birth control.

Roland Marchand writes, “Lehn and Fink, having previously advertised Lysol primarily as a household disinfectant, decided in the mid-1920s to openly recognize that most women actually purchased it for use in birth control.”<sup>109</sup> In the time period before the mention of birth control was legal, advertisers were forced to resort to euphuisms and vague text to imply usage. Lehn and Fink was a pioneer of this strategy in the marketplace. It promoted the illusion of “intimate advice” from physicians and also used euphemistic language to prey on the fears of women, with terminology like “calendar fears” and “being locked out” of the marriage bed. This strategy of vagueness allowed advertisers to market their products as “feminine hygiene” and fill a market need, while avoiding the legal problems of advertising birth control. The Lysol douche became the best-selling form of birth control used in this time period by women from all socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>110</sup>

Lysol straddled the fine line of the commercial and the scientific with its claim to “antiseptic” qualities and use of fear appeals and “physician testimonials.” Beginning with an ad in the Sears catalog in 1911 for an “internal douche,” which included rubber tubing, a suction bulb, and a bottle of Lysol, Lysol was the first company to advertise its product for feminine hygiene purposes.<sup>111</sup> Starting in the 1920s, advertising for the Lysol douche was handled by the George Batten Co., one of the top advertising firms of the time period.<sup>112</sup> The feminine hygiene euphemism was both profitable and discreet, and the Lysol douche was only one of many products that was advertised ambiguously as “feminine hygiene.”<sup>113</sup> It is shocking that Lehn and Fink was able to advertise its product for so long, considering the amount of damage it caused to women. Rachel Palmer and Sarah Greenberg, a Consumer’s Union member and an medical doctor respectively, advocated for women not to use Lysol or other feminine hygiene products in their book, *Facts and Frauds in Women’s Hygiene*.<sup>114</sup> However, they also acknowledged why

women used products like Lysol.<sup>115</sup> The lack of birth control information often led women to desperate measures, and women felt confident using Lysol because of the claims of the advertisers. Palmer and Greenberg informed women that Lysol was in fact not an effective form of birth control, and also caused deaths. They write,

Lysol is 'SAFE', says the Lehn and Fink Company, makers of this product. It takes more than the word 'safe' in capital letters to refute the many cases, in medical literature of injury and even death from Lysol. The United States Dispensary reports the death of a woman from using Lysol as a vaginal douche. As long ago as 1911 Witthaus and Becker stated in *Medical Jurisprudence, Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* that they had collected the reports of eleven poisonings for uterine irrigations with Lysol. Five of the poisoned women died. In the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (June 29, 1935), Dr. Louis Pancaro tells of the death of a young woman who injected Lysol into her uterus in order to bring about an abortion. Within half an hour of doing so, the girl became delirious and unconscious, and died two days afterward without regaining consciousness.<sup>116</sup>

Although there were consumer advocates looking out for women, such as Palmer and Greenberg, the ability of such messages to reach consumers was constrained by funding and legal issues. While Lehn and Fink were able to afford to advertise in national women's magazines, consumer groups were less able to fund such endeavors on their small budgets.<sup>117</sup> Although even the American Medical Association (AMA) had declared that Lysol was unsafe to douche with in the 1912 Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry, women were not likely to hear that message in the marketplace and in national women's magazines that desired to preserve the large amounts of advertiser dollars they received from feminine hygiene companies.<sup>118</sup> Additionally, because of the illegality of mailing items that were considered illicit, even medical texts, consumer protection groups struggled to get the message to women outside the borders of large cities.<sup>119</sup> Rural America was particularly difficult and expensive for consumer advocates to reach. Further, because birth control was such a booming business, advertisers sought market saturation for their ads, often advertising in several women's magazines each month. James Reed

indicates in his research that “birth control was a \$250 million a year business.”<sup>120</sup> Manufacturers were invested in making sure that their product was not marred by negative publicity. Even though deaths were caused by use of the Lysol douche, the laws allowed Lehn and Fink to claim that the deaths were caused by allergic reactions or misuse of the product by the victim.<sup>121</sup> Although other companies engaged in similar tactics, Lehn and Fink’s advertising campaign is notable because of the length of its campaign and because of the different rhetorical strategies it used in response to changes in the laws. Amy Sarch describes the Lysol feminine hygiene approach to advertising as very formulaic. She writes,

The ads followed the same basic pattern. They created a dramatic scenario between a woman and her doctor, friend, husband, or daughter that provided reasons for using the product- i.e. (sic) the importance of health, romance and youth, then presented their product as the solution to all social and physical ailments. The ads always included coupon offers for a detailed informative booklet written by a woman doctor, assured to arrive in a plain, brown “social correspondence” envelope.<sup>122</sup>

Ads offered to answer confidential questions and to provide scientific proof, both of which many women did not have access to through a physician or other medical provider. In a sense, Lysol was providing a service that women were actively seeking that the medical community could not provide. Because of the ambiguity of the copy which ran in the Lysol ads, Lehn & Fink were able to avoid prosecution and even beat the sales of other products which were more effective and less dangerous, such as the Certane Company run by Rosemarie Lewis, a birth control advocate.<sup>123</sup>

## **Conclusion**

It is easy to see how Lysol was able to advertise its product with no legal repercussions during this time period given the lack of consumer protections and the desire to avoid Comstock

consequences. The 1906 Pure Food and Drug act pertained primarily to labeling. Because Lysol did not label the product as capable of anything more than a disinfectant, Lehn and Fink were able to market the product through advertising any way that they saw fit. Additionally, because the FTC did not have power to control anything but business practices, women were at the mercy of legislation that was designed to protect businesses, not consumers. While the disinfectant offered by Lysol may have been advertised as capable of many miraculous tasks that it could not actually perform, the business practices of Lehn and Fink were not illegal by the standard of the day because they did not damage other businesses. Additionally, while the passage of the Wheeler-Lea Act did curb advertiser's false claims in some ways, it did not stop Lysol from being able to advertise as a douche at all. The ability of advertisers to exploit loopholes for their own benefit is not new, but the harm caused to women who used these products is clear. While advertisers were clever in their rhetorical practices and approaches, those who used patent medicines for their advertised purposes were the ones who bore the brunt of the lack of clear legislation until, and perhaps even through, the passage of the Wheeler-Lea bill. Further, the Comstock legislation gave businesses a clear reason to use euphemistic rhetoric in their ads. While the history of birth control in the U.S. is quite complex and rife with sexism and racism, it is also clear that exploitation of women who feared pregnancy was compounded by advertisers, the inaction of the medical community, and the inability of the government to pass sufficient consumer protection laws. The societal reasons that women may have felt compelled to use these products were magnified by advertising that highlighted cultural changes that placed women in the position of either making risky contraceptive choices or making the choice to get pregnant in the face of probable marital and economic insecurity.

This chapter has provided an overview of the history of sexual norms, health, hygiene, and birth control practice in the U.S. as a lens through which to read the case study of the Lysol douche. The availability of birth control and the quest to control fertility is a chapter in American history that is complex, convoluted and rife with contentious notions. Based on the brief history contained within this chapter, it is worth noting that the legacy of birth control in this country is still being explored by scholarly work. Access to contraception and abortion continues to be a contemporary issue today; one that induces strong emotion and incites political action. The history of birth control in this country is still being written and the case of Lysol is part of the narrative of birth control regulation in this country. Women's bodies have often been the causalities of the fight for family limitation. Given the misogynist views that advertisers had about women as consumers, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Lysol chose to first address the role thought most "natural" to women- motherhood.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Lynn Palmer and Sarah K. Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds in Women's Hygiene: A Medical Guide Against Misleading Claims and Dangerous Products*, New York: Vanguard Press, 1936), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds*, 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> For a full examination of the history of birth control throughout this time period see Christopher Tietze, *History of Contraceptive Methods* (New York: National Committee on Maternal Health, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> David Loth, "Planned Parenthood," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 272 (November 1950): 95-101.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime*, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion was a Crime*, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Shirley Green, *A Curious History of Contraception* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1971), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 57-58.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of problematic tropes associated with motherhood see Michele Hoffnung, "Motherhood: Contemporary Conflict for Women," in *Women: A Feminist Perspective*, ed. Jo Freeman (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 157-75.

<sup>15</sup> Barbara Welter, *Dimity Conventions: The American Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976), 21.

<sup>16</sup> Catharine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (Boston: T.H. Webb, 1842).

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2002), 19.

<sup>18</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, *Man Cannot Speak for Her, Vol. I* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1989), 15.

<sup>19</sup> Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 10-11.

<sup>20</sup> Allan Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 7-51.

<sup>21</sup> James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue: The Birth Control Movement and American Society Since 1830* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), 22.

<sup>22</sup> Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 127.

<sup>23</sup> Carolyn De Swarte Gifford and Amy R. Slagell, *Let Something Good Be Said: Speeches and Writings of Frances E. Willard* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), ix.

<sup>24</sup> Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "Femininity and Feminism: To Be or Not to Be a Woman" *Communication Quarterly*, 31 (1983): 101-8.

<sup>25</sup> Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 8.



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- <sup>26</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 11.
- <sup>27</sup> Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*, 21-25. The progressive era is generally understood by scholars as having occurred from 1890-1917.
- <sup>28</sup> Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press University Press, 1989), 17-20.
- <sup>29</sup> James Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, 3-6.
- <sup>30</sup> Carole R. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States: 1916-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 39-42.
- <sup>31</sup> Linda Gordon, "Voluntary Motherhood: The Beginnings of Feminist Birth Control Ideas in the United States," in *Women and Health in America*, ed. Judith Walzer Leavitt (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 253-68.
- <sup>32</sup> Janet Farrell Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 79.
- <sup>33</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 3-7.
- <sup>34</sup> Elmina Slenker, *Lucifer: The Lightbearer* 15.2 (September 1886): 3.
- <sup>35</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 3-7.
- <sup>36</sup> For a more complete discussion of the spread of venereal diseases and public health efforts to stop risky behaviors, especially in the military, see Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 52-122.
- <sup>37</sup> Robin Jensen, *Dirty Words: The Rhetoric of Public Sex Education, 1870-1924* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 20-22.
- <sup>38</sup> Brandt, *No Magic Bullet*, 33-37.
- <sup>39</sup> Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, 37.
- <sup>40</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 4.
- <sup>41</sup> Linda Gordon, "Beginning of Feminist Birth Control Ideas in the United States," 253-68. Free love groups were often small, anarchist sects that isolated themselves from the general public and were founded in dissent of the current political or religious environments. Although male dominated, free love groups often espoused feminist ideals.
- <sup>42</sup> Nicola Kay Beisel, *Imperiled Innocents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 76-104.
- <sup>43</sup> Jensen, *Dirty Words*, 9-13.
- <sup>44</sup> Heywood Broun and Margaret Leech, *Anthony Comstock: Roundsman of the Lord* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1927). This text is considered the most germinal text on Comstock because his family burned all of his diaries after it was published to prevent further works from being produced.
- <sup>45</sup> Margaret A Blanchard and John E. Semonche, "Anthony Comstock and his adversaries: The mixed legacy of this battle for free speech," *Communication Law and Policy* (2006): 317-66.
- <sup>46</sup> Brodie, *Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth Century America*, 259-60.
- <sup>47</sup> Anthony Comstock, *Traps for the Young*. Reprint. ed. Robert Bremner (1883; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).
- <sup>48</sup> Robin Jensen, *The Birth of Public Sexual Education in the United States: Women, Rhetoric and the Progressive Era* (PhD diss, University of Illinois, 2007), 40.
- <sup>49</sup> Blanchard and Semonche, *Anthony Comstock*, 320.
- <sup>50</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 4.

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- <sup>51</sup> Harriet F. Pilpel and Theodora S. Zavin, "Birth Control," *Marriage and Family Living* 14.2 (May 1952): 117-24.
- <sup>52</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, xv.
- <sup>53</sup> Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, 103-24.
- <sup>54</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 151.
- <sup>55</sup> Dorothy Wardell, "Margaret Sanger: Birth control's Successful Revolutionary," *American Journal of Public Health* 70.7 (1980): 736-42.
- <sup>56</sup> John M. Murphy, "'To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds': Margaret Sanger and Birth Control Review," *Women's Studies in Communication* 13.1 (1990): 23-45.
- <sup>57</sup> Wardell, "Margaret Sanger: Birth Control's Successful Revolutionary," 738.
- <sup>58</sup> Sara Hayden, "Reversing the Discourse of Sexology: Margaret Higgins Sanger's What Every Girl Should Know," *The Southern Communication Journal* 64.4 (1999): 295.
- <sup>59</sup> Jennifer Emerling Bone, "When Publics Collide: Margaret Sanger's Argument for Birth Control and the Rhetorical Breakdown of Barriers," *Women's Studies in Communication* 33 (2010): 16-33.
- <sup>60</sup> See Murphy, "'To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds' Margaret Sanger and The Birth Control Review," and Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*.
- <sup>61</sup> Hayden. "Reversing the Discourse of Sexology," 288-306.
- <sup>62</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Medical Essays* (Birmingham, AL: The Classics of Medicine Library, 1987), 192-93.
- <sup>63</sup> James Harvey Young, *Pure Food: Securing the Federal Food and Drugs Act of 1906* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 20.
- <sup>64</sup> Young, *Pure Food*, 25.
- <sup>65</sup> Thomas A. Bailey, "Congressional Opposition to Pure Food Legislation," *The American Journal of Sociology* 36.1 (July 1930): 52.
- <sup>66</sup> See James Harvey Young, *Pure Food*, "Progress toward a Law" for a full description of how public opinion and legislation held pace during this time period. There is some evidence to suggest that both the Mexican- American and Spanish American wars saw large death tolls for soldiers who ate adulterated foods that had spoiled during shipment. Additionally, soldiers who were wounded in the Civil War were reported to have died from infections due to adulterated food as well. These deaths were especially prominent in discourse about anti-adulteration. Additionally, some government contractors were jailed and fined because of soldiers' food adulteration cases. See Murray Galt Motter, "Pure Food Legislation vs. Poor Food Legislation" *Journal of the American Medical Association* XXXVI (1901): 944- 46.
- <sup>67</sup> Inger L. Stole, *Advertising on Trial: Consumer Activism and Corporate Public Relations in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 48-79.
- <sup>68</sup> Stole, *Advertising on Trial*, 50.
- <sup>69</sup> Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society, 1865-2005: From Hearth to HDTV* (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2009), 132.
- <sup>70</sup> Arthur Kallet and F.J. Schlink, *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs: Dangers in Everyday Foods, Drugs and Cosmetics* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1932).
- <sup>71</sup> Stole, *Advertising on Trial*, 53.
- <sup>72</sup> Young, *Medical Messiahs*, 195.
- <sup>73</sup> Stole, *Advertising on Trial*, 139-58.

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- <sup>74</sup> Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 43.
- <sup>75</sup> Cynthia Lee Henthorn, *For Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939-1959* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), 81-113.
- <sup>76</sup> McGovern, *Sold American*, 36.
- <sup>77</sup> McGovern, *Sold American*, 37-40.
- <sup>78</sup> Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 93.
- <sup>79</sup> Laird, *Advertising Progress*, 93.
- <sup>80</sup> Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (Boston: Wadsworth, 1998), 151.
- <sup>81</sup> Hill, *Advertising to the American Women*, 116.
- <sup>82</sup> Young, *Medical Messiahs*, 15.
- <sup>83</sup> Applegate, *Personalities and Products*, 78.
- <sup>84</sup> Barbara Hodgson, *In The Arms of Morpheus: The Tragic History of Laudanum, Morphine and Patent Medicines* (Buffalo: Firefly Books, 2001).
- <sup>85</sup> Hodgson, *In the Arms of Morpheus*, 113.
- <sup>86</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, I.
- <sup>87</sup> Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*, (Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998): 150.
- <sup>88</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 15-16.
- <sup>89</sup> Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes*, 150-51.
- <sup>90</sup> Marchand, *Selling the American Dream*, 343-44.
- <sup>91</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 2-24.
- <sup>92</sup> Cynthia Lee Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939-1959* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006), 81-113.
- <sup>93</sup> Charles F. McGovern, *Sold American: Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 1-20.
- <sup>94</sup> McGovern, *Sold American*, 37-40.
- <sup>95</sup> McGovern, *Sold American*, 15-18.
- <sup>96</sup> Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-War America* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, 2003), 296.
- <sup>97</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 1-24.
- <sup>98</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 10. As Marchand notes, the move to selling the benefit of the product, as opposed to producing ads that merely mentioned the product or provided a picture, began in 1914.
- <sup>99</sup> David Loth, "Planned Parenthood," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 272 (November 1950): 98.
- <sup>100</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 151-82.
- <sup>101</sup> Tone, "Contraceptive Consumers: Gender and the Political Economy of Birth Control in the 1930s," *Journal of Social History* (Spring 1996): 485.
- <sup>102</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1936), 143-44.
- <sup>103</sup> "The Accident of Birth," *Fortune* (February 1938), 84.
- <sup>104</sup> Oscar A. Bourgeault, "The Feminine Hygiene Question," *The American Journal of Nursing* 56.8 (August 1956): 1021-22.

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- <sup>105</sup> Mary Ellen Waller-Zuckerman, "'Old homes, in a city of perpetual change': Women's magazines, 1890-1916," *Business History Review* 63.4 (Winter 1989): 715-57.
- <sup>106</sup> Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, 22-67.
- <sup>107</sup> Andrea Tone, "Contraceptive Consumers: Gender and the Political Economy of Birth Control in the 1930s," *Journal of Social History* 29.3 (1996): 485- 506.
- <sup>108</sup> Tone, "Contraceptive Consumers," 487-88.
- <sup>109</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 346.
- <sup>110</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 151-82.
- <sup>111</sup> *Sears Catalog*, (Spring 1911): 867.
- <sup>112</sup> "Pebeco" Account for J. Walter Thompson" *Printer's Ink*, September 7, 1922, 12.
- <sup>113</sup> Grace Naismith, "The Racket in Contraceptives," *American Mercury* (July 1950): 3.
- <sup>114</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds*, 142-57.
- <sup>115</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds*, 142-57.
- <sup>116</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds*, 143-44
- <sup>117</sup> Stole, *Advertising on Trial*, 80-105.
- <sup>118</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 170.
- <sup>119</sup> Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, 239.
- <sup>120</sup> Reed, *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*, 239
- <sup>121</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 182.
- <sup>122</sup> Sarch, "Dirty Discourse," 102.
- <sup>123</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 182.

### Chapter 3

#### “Keeping Stride with her Sons and Daughters”: The Changing Conventions of Motherhood and the Lysol Douche

In an ad produced by the Lehn and Fink company for Lysol that ran in *Hearst's Cosmopolitan* in October 1927, the headline reads, “I asked my mother those very same questions- she didn't have this little book.”<sup>1</sup> The ad elaborates that it is a mother's duty to inform her daughters about “feminine hygiene” and encourage mothers to send away for a booklet that will “help” them to talk to their daughters. This is well demonstrated by figure 3.1, in which the headline reads, “Read this little book *carefully* dear... it explains things so much better than I can.”<sup>2</sup> During this time period, the notion that women, and women alone, were responsible for reproduction and fertility control was widely accepted in U.S. culture.<sup>3</sup> The concepts of motherhood and marriage were undergoing significant changes, as companionate marriage and reduced numbers of children per family were on the rise. Mothers were gaining more authority in their own homes through the push for “scientific” models of domesticity. Therefore, it is not surprising that advertisers used the trope of motherhood as a way to sell items to women, especially items that could potentially be birth control. The idyllic middle-class surroundings and cozy homes shown in these ads helped to normalize purchasing a product that was officially illegal and thought by many to be immoral. The quest for controlling fertility as a means to move into higher economic classes gave advertisers further reasons for addressing women with these strategies.

The previous chapter explained that advertising to women was a strategy for marketers in early to mid-nineteenth century. As Roland Marchand points out, advertisers were quite aware that women made significant purchasing decisions within the household and tried to appeal to a female audience in many ways, even as advertisers themselves believed women to be uneducated

consumers and easily emotionally manipulated. One of the most prominent ways that advertisers employed to compel women to buy their products was the motherhood-themed advertisement. Lysol was not the first advertising campaign to address women in such a fashion; however, the strategies Lysol used to address women, and especially mothers, about a product that was essentially not for sale in this country are worthy of further investigation. In this chapter, I analyze the motherhood-themed advertisements designed and produced for Lehn and Fink as part of its Lysol douche campaign. My goal is to elucidate what can be learned about the changing conventions of motherhood, women's role in society, and the proliferation of knowledge about birth control in this time period. For the purposes of this dissertation, I collected Lysol advertisements from two sources, *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* and *McCall's*. As I explained in chapter one, both of these magazines were popular during the time period of the Lysol campaign and both magazines attracted a primarily female, middle- to upper-class readership. Throughout the duration of the campaign, the motherhood trope was one of the more popular types of ads that Lehn and Fink chose to run. Lysol relied on its reputation as a product used by hospitals to convince women of "reliability." Additionally, Lysol ran campaigns that warned mothers of the risks of germs to their children, informed women that the use of Lysol in the operating room during childbirth could be life-saving, and Lysol would eventually go on to "sponsor" a set of quintuplets as an advertising ploy.<sup>4</sup> Here I focus on thirteen ads offering a feminine hygiene narrative focused on the role of mothers. Lysol was concerned with projecting a family friendly image as to negate some of the problematic issues that could arise from selling a product for birth control purposes, no matter how covertly. As I will show, according to Lehn and Fink the "modern mother" was one who had "vitality" because she limited the number of children she bore and therefore could escape the old-fashioned fate of becoming a mother who

becomes old too quickly in her unhappy and sexless marriage. Modern mothers with “vitality” could avoid illness that comes from being infected unknowingly with venereal disease by their partners, which would also limit their ability to care for their children. Mothers were suddenly expected to remain youthful and active, avoiding excessive pregnancies and illness for the good of her existing children, while protecting her children and other important women in her life from these perils as well.

### **Changing Conventions of Motherhood**

Linda Gordon explicates that the role of “mother” changed dramatically over time as economic necessity undermined the authority of Victorian gender norms.<sup>5</sup> Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton explain, “Before 1800, women who married could expect their first child within a year or two of the wedding ... a woman could expect to spend most of the next 20 years of her life bearing children. By contrast [in the 1970s] childbearing was spread over less than the first ten years of a woman’s married life.”<sup>6</sup> Historically women have always been considered more responsible for family planning and actual physical reproduction, however women have not always had authority in their households to make care decisions for the children they bore. In the Colonial era in the United States, fathers were primarily in charge of child rearing, even if women provided the day-to-day care; however, in the nineteenth century women began to assume the role of primary homemakers and child-carers.<sup>7</sup> While this role did not apply to all mothers, especially those who were in the lower socioeconomic classes and therefore had to work regardless of their childbearing status, this shift in societal norms indicates an important turning point in the role of mothering. The position of mothers changed significantly with the rise of the concept of “mother love” in the Victorian era. Mothers were designated the “angel of

the house,” a concept that required mothers to be selfless in relation to their children’s needs. Mothers were thought to be responsible for the moral development of their children and expected to forge intense emotional bonds with their offspring. “Mother love” was based on the idea that maternal affection for her child was the purest form of love, and promoted the ideal that motherhood required immense self-sacrifice on the part of the mother and that children were deeply indebted to their mothers for that sacrifice.<sup>8</sup> This required women to play the part of the martyr for their children and for the children to defer to the whims of their mothers far into adulthood. As the American public began to question the feasibility of Victorian values in their modern lives, the concept of mothering was changing as well.

The rise of efficiency experts and “scientific” approaches to homemaking and childcare in the early nineteenth century assigned women more domestic power over their households.<sup>9</sup> Women were asserting their knowledge of the household as power, and they were also tasked with passing homemaking information along to their daughters and raising their sons to be good citizens.<sup>10</sup> The rise of efficiency experts who “taught” women how to run their homes also included advice on how to best consume the right products for their families.<sup>11</sup> Women were assigned to pass on the cultural norms of femininity to their daughters and gradually the avenues available for doing so changed considerably.<sup>12</sup> While women had been granted some authority in their homes, it didn’t extend far beyond the front door. The idea of the “women’s sphere” gained popularity in the late 1800s and gave women some credibility and limited control over their households.<sup>13</sup> The cult of domesticity sharply defined women’s role within the home as private, and men’s role as public. The expectation for women in the U.S. was that they would take on the roles of primary caretaker of children and stay away from public life tasks such as voting and political debate. Women’s power was very circumscribed within the home and the lives of her



children. This changed with the passage of the nineteenth amendment. The right to vote changed white, upper class women's relationship with public life in many ways, but also fundamentally changed the role of women in both marriage and child care. The rise of companionate marriage and the limitation of children allowed women to focus more substantially on a smaller amount of children. Furthermore, a sharp decline in infant and child death due to increasing medical advancement meant that children were more likely to survive to adulthood. Women no longer needed to spend the greater part of their adult lives pregnant or nursing, if they chose not to. The role of mother changed substantially from a primarily physical labor to a relational expectation of nurturing.<sup>14</sup> Motherhood was viewed as the ultimate vocation for women and the "pinnacle of feminine fulfillment."<sup>15</sup> Mothering was much more than the physical care of children; instead women were encouraged to see motherhood as a truly transformative experience. According to historian Rebecca Jo Plant, "Mother love...has the capacity to transform and redeem: it could turn a shallow and vapid woman into a noble character; it could recall a wayward son or daughter to the path of virtue; it could mold a poor and scrawny boy into a great and powerful leader."<sup>16</sup> American motherhood was more than the individual care of individual children, but rather represented a fundamental American cultural institution. This shift in maternal norms was fostered by many cultural forces, including advertising.

### **Selling Motherhood**

The trope of motherhood has a long history in advertising. Many ads aimed at women still use the trope of motherhood as a marketing strategy. Patricia Johnson explains, "ads advanced an idealized world in which consumption assured consumers social mobility and rewarded women for conformity to traditional gender roles."<sup>17</sup> The role of traditional mother was

more pronounced in the advertising world. As Jennifer Scanlon explains, advertisers promoted the idea that women were families' primary consumers and that in order to be good mothers they needed to make the "correct" choices for their families.<sup>18</sup> Efficiency experts who made a living teaching women to shop, clean, and tend to their children in more "scientific" ways were popular at this time period and many advertisers began to move away from strategies that relied on overt emotional appeals and to use the language of "efficiency" and "science" to sell their products.<sup>19</sup> Following World War I, the rise of home economics courses and the push to revolutionize the country through science added credibility to the efficiency movement.<sup>20</sup> The trope of "motherhood" is one that advertisers used to entice women to buy their products, but also as a mechanism to induce guilt and self-doubt in women that they were not competent parents and wives, especially as the role of housewife was further attached to the growing "scientific" language of the period. As Janice Rutherford explains in her biography of home efficiency expert Christine Frederick, advertisers and many others benefitted from the rise of so-called household "efficiency experts" and others who made a living from explaining to women how they were lacking in both efficiency and household management.<sup>21</sup> The idea that women in and of themselves were not adequate to run their households without help from editors, experts, and advertisers proliferated widely in this time period. In her examination of *Ladies Home Journal* advertisements from 1910-1930, Jennifer Scanlon examines the role of the advertiser and the magazine in the lives of women and culture. She writes, "Most assume that the purchaser is a mother who stays at home with her children. Perhaps she has a servant to help her occasionally with her household chores, but this reader is neither wealthy or working class."<sup>22</sup> Scanlon goes on to explain how the colorful, glossy ads raised the standards for proper womanhood, and especially motherhood:

A Nestle formula advertisement tells how it is dangerous business to be a baby. The text illustrates the double appeal to cleanliness and proper motherhood; “Dangerous indeed when we see the tiny bodies menaced by dirty dairies, by sick cows, by ignorance, by disease; and dangerous indeed when we know that one baby out of six last year died.” In an era in which infant mortality loomed high, advertisers targeted women rather than milk producers, the national government, or the medical establishment as responsible parties. At the turn of the century women felt that they provided adequate care for their children if they kept them fed, clean and dry. Over the course of the next thirty years, however, standards rose and women found that they had to be more attentive then ever—all the while maintaining youthful standards for themselves. Motherhood was no mean feat, increasingly dependent as it was on correct consumer behavior.<sup>23</sup>

The Lehn and Fink Company began to run ads quite early in its advertising campaigns, using the trope of motherhood to provoke women’s fears of infant loss and death during childbirth. One ad from January 1927 ran in *McCall’s* and included text that reminded readers of the danger expectant mothers faced from childbirth. The ad proclaimed, “Every year twenty thousand mothers die in childbirth...every year one thousand babies die at birth...our maternal death rate is the highest in the civilized world.”<sup>24</sup> From there, it was a short distance for advertisers to exploit these reasonable fears to prompt women to think about their daughters, sisters, or other important women in their lives also dying in childbirth, losing a child, or suffering from having too many children. Control of fertility was placed squarely on the shoulders of women. Additionally, older women were being pushed to maintain their “vitality” and to remain younger longer for their children and husbands; for some women that may have indicated remaining disease free or using deodorants on their bodies to maintain an active sex life to appease their husbands.<sup>25</sup> This push for women to be more attentive and involved in their children’s lives meant that mothers were responsible for “launching” their daughters correctly and ensuring their future happiness through educating them about pregnancy dangers, avoidance of unwanted pregnancies and children, and even protecting themselves from disease. Lysol used these strategies during the length of its campaign for the Lysol douche.

## **Motherhood Campaign**

There are three primary types of ads that Lehn and Fink ran with the motherhood trope. The first type of ad admonished mothers that they needed stay young and energetic for their existing children and the way to do this was through the use of feminine hygiene and avoidance of additional pregnancies, and perhaps through avoidance of disease. While these themes ran throughout the Lysol campaign, these motherhood ads were the first type run in Lysol's feminine hygiene campaign. These ads often relied on veiled references to pregnancy by intimating that being pregnant or sick would rob their existing children, as well as their husbands, of the time and care they needed. The term "daintiness" is often used in these ads to indicate lack of pregnancy, as well as the term "vitality" to speak to the active lives women could lead if they avoided additional pregnancies or contracting venereal disease. These ads often alluded to hospital usage of Lysol or used generic physician testimony in a bid to tie Lysol to the medical community.

The second type of ad informed mothers that they could spare their daughters the worry and concern that they themselves faced as new brides if they took the advice that Lysol offered or merely allowed Lysol to inform their loved ones through the booklets offered in the ads. These ads became popular around 1927, although themes of family/daughter protection continued to appear throughout the ads I collected for this dissertation. Here Lysol assumed the role of confidante to convince women that they are offering "scientific" advice that can be helpful to those whom they wish to protect from excessive childbearing. I would also argue that some mothers or older women may have felt that they would protecting women who were

important to them from disease contraction, especially in the case of mothers who worried their son-in-laws were not faithful to their daughters, or those who might have experienced unfaithfulness from their husbands as a part of the sexual double standards of the day. Women were encouraged to send away for booklets and materials that could help them to have (or avoid) these conversations with their daughters. These materials were billed as “scientific knowledge” and played heavily into the idea that women could get information from Lysol that they were unwilling or unable to approach a physician about. Women were invited to engage their daughters and other important women in their lives on this subject or, conversely, to allow Lysol to do all the talking through free pamphlets.

Finally, the third type of ad (Fig. 3.4) used the role of “daughter” to project and raise cultural concerns about motherhood with headlines like, “Is your daughter proud of her mother?”<sup>26</sup> These ads asked women to examine their lives and the examples they were setting for their daughters. Lysol asked women to consider how their lives could be improved through the use of feminine hygiene and the avoidance of pregnancy. The ads work individually to raise issues, but also work together to depict the changing cultural climate of motherhood in this time period. Below I analyze these different types of ads in detail.

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# Lysol

Disinfectant  
REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.



**"Read this little book *carefully*, dear**

THERE is much misinformation about feminine hygiene—a subject so vital to health and happiness that it behooves every woman to beware of unprofessional advice and to learn the *facts*.

As a contribution to the proper understanding and practice of scientific bodily care the makers of "Lysol" Disinfectant offer a booklet which gives the facts—frankly, explicitly and reliably. Its name is "*The Scientific Side of Health and Youth*" and its author is a woman physician who has combined sympathetic appreciation of woman's intimate problems with professional knowledge and experience.

The position of "Lysol" Disinfectant itself in the field of feminine hygiene is indicative of the trustworthy nature of this

... It explains things so much better than I can"

booklet. For 30 years "Lysol" Disinfectant has been the standard personal antiseptic in doctors' offices, hospitals and homes. Its quality has never varied. And today it has no substitute where complete disinfection is imperative.

Send for the booklet today. It is free. It will reach you in a plain envelope. It will contribute to your peace of mind. Use the coupon below.

In the meantime, play safe in any immediate use of an antiseptic for personal cleansing and protection. Insist on "Lysol" Disinfectant—and "Lysol" Disinfectant alone. It is safe. It is *sure*. And it *cleanses* as it *kills germs*.

Made by LYSOL, Incorporated, a division of Lehn & Fink Products Company. Sole distributors, Lehn & Fink, Inc. Bloomfield, N. J.



LEHN & FINK, Inc., Sole Distributors  
Department 31, Bloomfield, New Jersey

Please send me, free, your booklet,  
"The Scientific Side of Health and Youth"

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Street \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

Figure 3.1. "Read this little book *carefully* dear" Hearst's *Cosmopolitan*, February 1927

*Pushing Modern Norms of Motherhood- The Quest for Youth*

An ad from *Hearst's Cosmopolitan* from 1923 makes clear that the old norms of motherhood are no longer what “modern women” were dealing with. Their lifestyles were more active and their lives could be more fulfilling if they chose. The copy of the ad reads, “the old fashioned woman settled down to a contented old age at forty- to her sock darning and the coddling of innumerable aches and pains. Look at our modern woman of forty today! Life is just budding open for her.”<sup>27</sup> This attempt to sell modernity, and the changing conventions of motherhood, was aided by the changing cultural norms for women at the time. This endeavor was aided by the incorporation of themes that had been used by other companies to encourage women to purchase new cosmetic items and flex their consumer muscles. While most women had eschewed make-up and beauty items as reserved for “public” women or “jezebels” before the 1920s, changing conventions in the 1920s paved the way for further consumer product use by women. As Kathy Peiss states,

The mass market industry did challenge some codes of feminine appearance that had seemed fixed and unshakeable in the nineteenth century. Formerly distinct images of mother and daughter, leisured lady and wage earner, the decent and the disreputable, now began to blur. In 1909, for instance, a Pompeian skin cream sentimentally depicted a venerable mother revered by her adult daughter, whose assurance, “You’re All Right,” referred not only to the mother’s clear complexion but to her disposition. Fourteen years later, Pompeian portrayed a very different scene, of the modern mom inspected and approved by her family. “You’re getting younger every day!” observed the daughter, and indeed, the 1923 mother had exactly the same face as her child. “Thanks to cosmetics,” an industry analyst exulted, “the mother of today is more the big sister and enjoys and appreciates the pleasures of her daughters.”<sup>28</sup>

Cosmetics companies, however, were not the only advertisers to exhort the importance of feminine beauty norms for mothers and their daughters. Feminine hygiene manufacturers also capitalized on women’s quest for youth and “vitality” in the U.S. market. Lysol began to offer a free booklet entitled, “The scientific side of youth and beauty,” accompanied by a headline that

told women that “modern women find this booklet of vital importance.”<sup>29</sup> Lysol pointed to scientific advancement as one way that mothers could avoid aging and pregnancy. An ad from *Hearst’s* in 1926 (Fig. 3.2) demonstrates:

Our mothers, so often, were “old” long before their time. They lived before science had applied itself to the delicate problems of feminine hygiene. The modern woman knows how to protect her health and youth. And the recipe is simple: sane living plus the proper practice of feminine hygiene...Preserve your health and youth with “Lysol” disinfectant.<sup>30</sup>

Advertising Lysol as “thoroughly effective,” ads in 1923 and 1925 informed women about the Lysol douche as a “new practice” that “preserves health and daintiness” as well as helping women avoid forces that could “claw at her beauty.”<sup>31</sup> Lysol appealed directly to women who wished to adhere to the new standards of modernity and youthfulness to entice women to buy its products for health and beauty.



Hearst's International Cosmopolitan for September, 1926 177



**"But, mother, *your* mother looked so *old* at your age"**

OUR MOTHERS, so often, were "old" long before their time. They lived before science had applied itself to the delicate problems of feminine hygiene.

The modern woman knows how to *protect* her health and youth. And the recipe is simple: sane living plus the proper practice of feminine hygiene.

*But be careful in so vital a matter as personal hygiene.* Use a disinfectant which is both safe *and* certain—whose quality never varies—and which has been relied upon by the medical profession for a generation.

For 30 years "Lysol" Disinfectant has been the standard personal disinfectant in hospitals, doctors' offices and homes. It is used in every country. It cleanses as it *kills germs*. In fact, it was "Lysol" Disinfectant which was first associated with the modern practice of feminine hygiene.

Preserve your health and youth with "Lysol" Disinfectant. Send for the booklet offered below. It is reliable. It was written for women by a woman physician. It will contribute to your peace of mind.

"Lysol" Disinfectant is sold by all druggists. The bottle comes in the original yellow package. *Made by Lysol Incorporated, a division of Lehn & Fink Products Company. Sole distributors, Lehn & Fink, Inc., Bloomfield, N. J. Canadian distributors, Lehn & Fink (Canada) Limited, Toronto.*

Figure 3.2. "But, mother, *your* mother looked so *old* at your age" Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan, September 1926

Lysol's advertising copy relied heavily on promoting the idea of modern as more highly valued, desirable, and acceptable than old-fashioned norms. An ad from 1923 that uses the trope of modern vs. old fashioned states, "At twenty, a girl is in the flush of youth- active, vivacious, brimming over with buoyancy. Life is a continual round of gaiety. She *looks* and *feels* well. At thirty and forty, life has begun to claw at her beauty...and yet women *need not* lose their vitality, charm or beauty at thirty – or even forty! [Italics in original]"<sup>32</sup> Lysol taps into the advertising zeitgeist designed to make women feel they needed to consume more beauty products to be perceived as younger throughout their life span. The term "vitality" appeared widely in the ads. As an ad from March 1924 demonstrates, Lysol was using the term vitality in opposition to the "sickly, weak mother [who] is hardly an inspiring companion for her intense, eager children" and an ad from June 1926 indicated that, "nervousness, fatigue and weakness result in a loss of tone, a feeling of lowered vitality."<sup>33</sup> While the common understanding of the term today would speak to physical strength or health, the term vitality in this time period potentially would have been interpreted as remaining young or possessing a youthfulness that ran counter to the expectation of old age for many women. As the same ad from 1924 states, "[women] don't want to be relegated to the background in [their] children's lives."<sup>34</sup> Vitality also could have been interpreted as avoiding the pitfalls of excessive pregnancies, as the terminology indicated not being slowed down by pregnancy, or avoiding disease. The meaning of vitality is brought into focus by ad copy that seems allude to pregnancy, including copy from this ad from June 1926: "a woman who had charm, gentleness, poise and a certain untiring vitality which comes from knowing how to take care of herself."<sup>35</sup> Additionally, an ad from *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* from February 1926 constructs the link between pregnancy and vitality with ad copy that reads, "And you know their mothers by a certain dignity and lightness of movement

that belong to women who are sure of themselves, proud of themselves, who know how to take care of themselves in every way.”<sup>36</sup> It is not a far leap to extrapolate that “lightness” refers to a state of not being pregnant. Lysol also used terms such as the “buoyancy of feeling young,”<sup>37</sup> “promote bodily vigor,”<sup>38</sup> and explained the modern women as one whose “animation and joy come from serene good nature, the crowning token of excellent physical condition.”<sup>39</sup> Pregnancy in this time period was never overtly stated, only alluded to; it would have been in poor taste to use the term “pregnant” in polite company. The tides were turning on terminology as the flappers pushed the envelope of polite society by using the term “knocked up” to describe an accidental pregnancy; however, many women would have heard and been familiar with the common medical term “gravity,” which is the Latin term for heavy, to describe pregnancy.<sup>40</sup> Using the term “lightness” in the ad would have been a clear indication to women familiar with this term. The term dainty was also used quite extensively in ads, indicating that women could “preserve feminine daintiness” by using Lysol.<sup>41</sup> Lysol ads often used daintiness as a coded way to infer freedom from pregnancy, as well as informing women that use of Lysol as a douche would fight infections that make women old before their time. However, the “infections” and “germs” they are alluding to are pregnancy and sperm. The trope of avoiding aging or not going into advanced age with the expectation that “being contented” is the proper response, is helped by the second way that Lysol addresses mothers – with “Science”.

Lysol invoked the trope of “Science” in relation to youthfulness.<sup>42</sup> As an early ad from April 1923 explains, women could find youthfulness through a good diet, exercise and use of Lysol, which is “attained only by the same means a doctor utilizes- the use of an antiseptic effective for personal hygiene,” the ad goes on to remind the reader that Lysol was “originally prepared for use by the medical profession.”<sup>43</sup> Lysol uses pseudo-scientific language, invoking

the use of its product in hospitals and medical settings, and also offered scientific booklets that could be sent away for which were supposedly authored by a physician or recommended by a physician (depending on the ad). Lysol positioned itself as more accessible than a family doctor, but just as (or more) knowledgeable. The booklets also played into the trope of pseudo-science with names like “The scientific side of youth and beauty”<sup>44</sup> and “Health safeguards in the home.”<sup>45</sup> Linguistically, the Lysol ads relied on pseudo-scientific and euphemistic language to convey their message. Amy Sarch remarks that advertisers used the same approaches with feminine hygiene items as with soap or toothpaste: “Advertisers translated contraception into a luxury item that resembled other hygienic products- soap, deodorant, mouthwash. Intent on selling, advertisers kept up with popular trends and attempted to create ads that appealed to women, or rather, wrote in language they considered relevant to the woman consumer.”<sup>46</sup> This can be seen in ads for Lysol that also listed other uses, including: “For wounds, for the sickroom” and compared feminine hygiene to being as “important as regular brushing of the teeth.”<sup>47</sup> Given the rise of the efficiency movement and the supposed importance of a mother’s consuming habits to the lives and happiness of her family, advertisers pathologized the body as something that needed to be controlled or contained through the consumption and use of consumer products. As Sharra Vostral explains, control of the female body through consumer products has come about only fairly recently and was predicated by the development of such markets through modern manufacturing.<sup>48</sup> Advertisers created the language of feminine hygiene items as the markets emerged for these products, however, many of the terms advertisers used would have been quite recognizable for women of this time period. The formation of many euphemistic terms for all kinds of bodily processes were used by advertisers, many of which had been coined by the advertisers themselves. Advertisers medicalized bad breath with the term

halitosis<sup>49</sup> and continued to develop euphemistic terms to describe all kinds of bodily processes, especially menstruation and contraception. The terms “intimate,” “safe,” “happiness” (or unhappiness, meaning pregnancy), “daintiness,” and “fastidious” are used over and over in the Lysol ads. All of these terms could be seen as applying to the prevention of pregnancy. As mentioned in the section above, the term “dainty” was re-capsulated by many companies, including Lysol, as a way to express not being pregnant, so many women would have recognized this term. It may also have alluded to smells or discharge, either from illness or from a woman’s natural cycle. Given the possible repercussions for violating the Comstock Act, advertisers were careful to use terms that would have been recognizable but still allowed plausible deniability in case of running afoul of the censors. The euphemisms here can be readily identified, but are still within the bounds of censorship by relying on implicit connections. The connection between motherhood and marriage, for instance, is not explicitly stated, but clearly alluded to. The linguistic choices also collude with the choices of other manufactures of similar items, so it would have been readily apparent to the women buying these products that the products had similar aims. The scientific language and promises of the Lysol ads were designed to appeal to a woman’s sense of trust that the information she was receiving was more than just ad copy, but based in scientific fact. Given the rise of scientific and technological advancement following the war, American society was enamored of the new and the scientific in their everyday lives. While homes were changed in many ways by the installation of new technological advancements like washing machines and refrigerators, the American public was also incorporating new scientific advancements into their personal lives. Lysol’s ads functioned from a position of authority that purports to know what the audience wants to know, and offers that knowledge for the mere purchase of a bottle of Lysol.

*Lysol Attempts to Assume the Role of Scientific Confidante*

In an ad from *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* that ran in February of 1927, the accompanying photograph features an older woman seated on a chair showing a booklet to a younger woman (Fig. 3.1). The copy headline reads, "Read this little book *carefully*, dear...it explains things so much better than I can."<sup>50</sup> The ad copy goes on to explain that there is "misinformation about feminine hygiene" and admonishes women to avoid "unprofessional" advice and purports to give the "facts" women need. The ad copy intimates that Lysol is sharing highly sought after, but difficult to obtain information. Ads included a "coupon" that could be cut from the ad and sent to the company for "scientific information." With a direct appeal that addresses the audience as "you," the company appeals to the reader directly. The ads seem to address the reader with information, ostensibly, that is helpful and sought after. Given the high infant mortality rate and the high rate of women who died in childbirth, it is easy to see how women could have been easily persuaded to use a product that was being advertised as a way to avoid an early death for both mother and baby, and would want to protect their grown daughters from a similar fate. Lysol seems to be offering information that cannot be obtained any other way, at least for most women without a personal physician or the means to acquire one. In an ad from 1927, Lysol addresses women with this copy, "I asked *my* mother those very same questions- *she* didn't have this little book."<sup>51</sup> By situating the information in the ad as scarce, Lysol is put in the position of being an authority on the issue, able to provide information that is wanted and needed, but not available elsewhere. Lysol ads assume a confessional, intimate tone in addressing women about this "problem." Lysol also uses the pseudo-scientific language trope to situate its "booklets" as the best place to get this information. In the same ad in the October

1927 issue of *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, the copy assures women that Lysol is the purveyor of safety:

But be sure you get the facts about feminine hygiene. 'Lysol' Disinfectant is the safe, certain antiseptic for vital use. It has been the unquestioned standard with doctors, hospitals, and fastidious women for over 30 years. Fads in personal antiseptics come and go. But the number of women who use 'Lysol' Disinfectant is increasing *at a greater rate today than ever before!*<sup>52</sup>

The language of safety and intimacy adds to Lysol's confessional tone. Lysol is explicitly telling women that it is the "only" "personal antiseptic" that can offer them "safety," even though there were numerous companies offering a very similar product, including the competitor Zonite.<sup>53</sup>

Lysol wants women to feel that its douche is the only possible solution to the problem of birth control. This is a carefully crafted tone that allows women who are "in on the secret" to read between the lines, and those who are outsiders to read the ads literally. This evasive approach to language is likely due to obscenity laws, but also plays into the persona that Lysol wants to be associated with: trustworthy, discrete, and knowledgeable. Lysol wants women to feel safe buying its product at the drugstore, without anyone being the wiser that the intended purpose is birth control or avoiding personal odors. The insinuation of the matter, as opposed to blatantly stating the facts, allows the rhetor to appear to be sharing a secret as well as appearing above scrutiny for obscenity laws. The vagueness of the message appears to be something that the audience might have misperceived as a "tasteful" approach to a subject which was quite base and unmentionable in polite company. This also allows Lysol to perform factuality, while in reality providing little to no actual fact in the ads at all. This can be seen in ads which attribute "most illnesses are the result of bacterial infection" or ads that testify that "Lysol is 100 per cent effective in destroying harmful germ life." As one can see from these examples, these general statements seem reasonable, but provide no indication of how Lysol will explicitly remedy the

situation. Given the claims of that ad, it is hard to imagine that Lysol could produce proof that it actually kills 100% of germs, or that merely douching with Lysol could cure a bacterial infection. Instead, this very guarded method gives the impression that discretion is for the sensibilities of the reader, as opposed to the lack of actual facts to express. While a product that assumes its audience is intelligent enough to notice the omission of actual factual information might take a different tack, Lysol seems to assume that women reading this ad will be fooled into thinking that Lysol is providing actual scientific facts. This can be seen in examples where Lysol claims that its product contains “no free alkali nor free acid,” which is so vague as to be useless from a chemistry standpoint.<sup>54</sup> While the ad pretends to speak to women as peers, it is actually talking down to women. This is especially apparent in the ads that chastise mothers who do not give their daughters “accurate information, not heresy, guesswork, or old wives’ tales.”<sup>55</sup> It was highly probable that women were not discussing their feminine hygiene needs with their neighbors, family or friends. Because of the embarrassment factor, ads advised mothers to “send away for a pamphlet” to explain feminine hygiene to their daughters, escaping the need for a conversation which might be embarrassing for both parties. This allowed the company to take the place of the advice giver, especially in a time when it was not possible, or comfortable, for most women to seek such information from their physicians or pharmacists. Physicians, even if they were approached on the topic, were not trained in contraceptives and could provide little information about the topic and may have potentially faced criminal charges if they did discuss such options with their patients. This led women to seek out their own information, and often the information that they had access to came from advertisers and women’s magazines. As an ad from 1929 advises women,

Lucky is the bride who has a married sister- or older married friend- to tell her frankly the truth about this vital subject. But no woman need misunderstand the facts. Send the



coupon at the right and our free booklet, "The Scientific Side of Health and Youth," will be sent to you. It will reach you in a plain envelope. It contains sound professional advice and directions, written in simple language by an eminent woman physician.<sup>56</sup>

Lysol positions itself as poised to take the place of other women in a woman's life who might offer advice regarding pregnancy avoidance or sexual education, but makes the claim that they are better suited to advice-giving because of their "scientific" approach. Lysol seeks to be trusted like a mother, older sister or an older married friend, but does so by invoking the authority of science and "an eminent woman physician." Lysol seeks to be both a confidante and an authority for the woman reading the ad. The campaign encourages women to send away for their booklet entitled, "The scientific side of health and youth." While Lysol is not a scientific authority, it claims insider knowledge through pseudo-scientific language and the claim that a "woman physician" wrote the booklet. As many women would not have had access to information any other way, the idea that a woman who could be trusted wrote these booklets and a physician endorsed the product may have been very compelling for women who believed they were receiving valid scientific knowledge, and that they were perhaps responsible for sharing that knowledge with loved ones they hoped to protect. Advertisers requested action on the part of the audience, asking them to send away for the booklets and pass along "scientific" information to their daughters, sisters, friends, lovers, and anyone else who would listen. Lysol was interested not only in selling its product to women, but also in encouraging women to recommend the product to others.

### *Daughters as Foils for the Changing Norms of Motherhood*

Lysol's campaign used its particular concept of "daughters" as a way to speak directly to mothers in two ways. First, the ads used the concept of "daughter" through text and image to

encourage women to use their product for both youthfulness and for responsible information transmission to their daughters. Second, the ads directed women to use Lysol to avoid having additional children, therefore allowing them to devote more time and resources to existing children. Lysol's ads often featured the subjects of the photographs reclining on overstuffed chairs or perching on expensive looking couches in front of glowing fireplaces or large works of art. Mothers and daughters are wearing fashionable clothing and have up to date hairstyles. Often the mother is seated above the daughter in a way that indicates that the daughter is looking up to her (Fig. 3.3). The Lysol idealized version of the mother-daughter conversation happens in a fictionalized world of wealth and status. Many of the women who used Lysol as a douche did so because they were unable to access or afford more expensive forms of birth control, so the images shown in the ads also function aspirationally, reinforcing the idea that fewer children would lead to wealthier lives for women who wished to ascend social class.<sup>57</sup>



**"Do you tell your daughter *everything*?"**

**"EVERYTHING"** may be worse than *nothing* if your own information is incorrect. Feminine hygiene, plus sane living habits, is so vital to health and happiness—and so capable of harm if improperly practised—that every wife and mother owes it to herself and to others to know the facts.

MAKE NO MISTAKE. *Only a poison can kill germs.* That is why "Lysol" Disinfectant has for 30 years been standard for personal disinfection in hospitals, doctors' offices and homes. That is why it still is without substitute in medical opinion and tests.

MAKE NO MISTAKE. The proper practice of feminine hygiene involves more than the choice of the right disinfectant. In the booklet shown below the makers of "Lysol" Disinfectant offer you the professional guidance you should have.

The booklet was written by a woman physician. It is frank and explicit. It is reliable. It has helped thousands of other women. It will help you, too, and contribute to your peace of mind. It will reach you in a plain envelope. It is free.

In the meantime, use "Lysol" Disinfectant for all antiseptic purposes. It is both safe and sure. Its quality never varies. Every drop is potent. It cleans as it kills germs. Get a bottle at once and send for the booklet today.

Made by Lysol, Incorporated, a division of Lehn & Fink Products Company. Sole distributors Lehn & Fink, Inc., Bloomfield, N. J.

*Clip the coupon now before you for*

LEHN & FINK, INC., Sole Distributors  
Department 44, Bloomfield, New Jersey

Figure 3.3. "Do you tell your daughter *everything*?" Hearst's *International-Cosmopolitan*, April 1927

This of course did not apply to women who were not middle class or white, as they were not able to apply these norms anyway. The copy of the ads directly addresses the reader and insinuates that they can make the changes they desire in their lives with the addition of this product. It is clear that the intended audience and the pictured lifestyle are pretty far apart, but intentionally so. Instead the audience, through direct appeal in the ads, is invited to see themselves in this aspirational lifestyle through purchase of the product. Several of the photographs accompanying the ads in the Lysol campaign show a youthful, middle class white woman in the foreground of a photo with one or two children in the shot looking at her adoringly. The youthful, beautiful

mother is clearly the center of the children's universe through placement in the photograph and the adoring looks she receives from her children. In other ads, the woman is shown with a single child or two children. The child pictured is usually a daughter, although some ads feature a son in addition. In these ads, the mother appears to be engaged in the care-taking of children. More negatively toned ads feature the mother in the background being overshadowed by the younger and more vibrant daughter. In these ads, the daughter is the generally the focus of the image. The children shown are often either very young children or teenagers. The ads emphasize wealthy settings by posing the models in expensive looking clothing and jewelry in opulent settings. The houses featured in the ads were often decorated with expensive wall hangings and depicted wide, sweeping staircases and large fireplaces. Admittedly, most women who bought Lysol probably did not live in locations like this or wear the type of clothing shown in the ads. Instead these images were aspirational for women who hoped to be middle class and through the use of Lysol to limit the size of their families. The families pictured are always smiling and happy with their non-pregnant mother. The ad copy again uses the term "happiness" to express to women that they should use Lysol to avoid future pregnancies, which may wreck their families. An ad in *Hearst's* from June 1926 reads,

Just being a mother is a job with twenty-four hour shifts seven days a week. There are some mothers who succeed so well in this difficult task that their children are happy and contented, proud of their homes, always glad to be there and to bring in their friends. It is a magic quality in motherhood that works this spell. Always you find in these households a woman who has charm, gentleness, poise and a certain untiring vitality which comes from *knowing how to take care of herself* [italics in original].<sup>58</sup>

The reader of this ad can envision the opposite of the Lysol ideal very easily, a woman with too many children, whose home is always a mess, and who is pregnant, tired, and doesn't want her kids' friends to come over. The advertised ideal is in stark contrast to the mother who is tired from another pregnancy or from working outside the home and isn't "fastidious" about her own

care. The ad features a tag next to a smaller picture of the bottle of Lysol, which extolls the virtues of a “fastidious woman’s toilet.” It is doubtful that most middle or lower class women had a “toilet” (a French term for a routine of beauty care) or that they could afford one. Yet, many poor women of this time period, who may have lived in tenements or cold water walk up apartments very close to their neighbors, would have perhaps been swayed by the idea that fewer children could produce a substantial increase in economic and social class.

Lysol’s aspirational images also indicated that fewer children were part of an increase in living standards. The small number of children pictured would indicate to women that restricting their family size would allow them to spend more time and resources on fewer children, ostensibly giving them a better start in life. Lysol’s ads also implored women to protect their existing children from becoming orphaned through death in childbirth or dealing with a grief stricken mother through the use of the product by again invoking the high infant and maternal mortality rate in this time period. Many women also would have responded to the sense of the danger of childbirth at this time, as most women would have known of the profound risks childbirth carried. An ad from 1927 shows a happy mother and baby with the tagline, “Lysol’ protected them both.”<sup>59</sup> The copy then goes on to give statistics about infant death and maternal childbirth death and states, “According to the United States government reports, these *unnecessary* deaths are caused, in the vast majority of cases, by improper care of the mother and by infection caused by the lack of asepsis.”<sup>60</sup> The ad goes on to beseech women to choose Lysol as the preferred personal, household, and hospital disinfection product to avoid these outcomes, which would undoubtedly affect their living children and husbands. Many women in previous generations, very sadly, died in childbirth and did not see their children grow up, and most women of this time period would have personally known a woman or baby who died during childbirth or

infancy. These sad facts were employed by companies who exploited the fears of women who wished to see their children grow up and be an active part of their lives.



## Is your daughter proud of her mother?



EVERY now and then you see them on the street—the daughters who are proud of their mothers. You can tell it by the way they hold their heads, by their sedate little expressions. And you know their mothers by a certain dignity and lightness of movement that belong to women who are sure of themselves, proud of themselves, who know how to take care of themselves in every way.

Women today give the proper time and thought to diet, sleeping, exercise, and they keep the body in a state of scientific cleanliness. Much of their charm and health—and youth—come from knowing how to protect themselves against the inroads of petty disabilities. Fatigue, nervousness and weakness quickly result in loss of tone. Physicians say the modern practice of feminine hygiene is of great

importance in the preservation of health and vitality.

The antiseptic which doctors advocate for feminine hygiene is "Lysol" Disinfectant, the standard antiseptic in hospitals and with physicians everywhere. They know that it is 100% trustworthy, ideal for feminine hygiene.

### Send now for FREE booklet on the important subject of feminine hygiene

If you want to know more about "Lysol" and about the problems of feminine hygiene, mail the coupon below for a free set of our "Lysol" Health Library.

If you haven't a bottle of "Lysol" get one today. All drug stores sell it. Complete directions for its use come in every package. Be sure you get the genuine "Lysol".

### "Lysol" is ideal for feminine hygiene because of these three reasons:

1. It is soothing and lubricating, its effect protective and comforting. It leaves a tonic feeling of general well-being.
2. Three times stronger than powerful carbolic acid, yet so carefully is it blended that in proper proportion it cannot irritate or harm the most sensitive tissues.
3. It provides absolute protection against infection, and its gentle deodorant qualities are a safeguard of feminine daintiness.

Made only by Lysol, Inc., Sole Distributors, LEHN & FINK, INC., Bloomfield, N. J.  
Canadian Agents: Harold F. Ritchie & Co., Ltd., 10 McCaul Street, Toronto

A Division of

LEHN & FINK PRODUCTS COMPANY

**Lysol**  
Disinfectant

Figure 3.4. "Is your daughter proud of her mother?" Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan, February 1926

As one headline proclaims, “Keeping stride with her sons and daughters: the modern mother is a real factor in the lives of her children, by keeping her youth, her charm.”<sup>61</sup> This focus on remaining active and relevant to their children’s lives spoke directly to fears of women who had seen their mothers bear too many children, often to the detriment of caring for those she already had. Women could have associated with ad copy that focused on being an “active part” of their children’s lives. Lysol also uses the phrase “contribute to your peace of mind” in several of the ads in an attempt to convince women that use of Lysol will help them stop worrying about fertility and childbirth through use of the product. To get these messages across, ads used images of daughters to address mothers directly. Many of these ads addressed the conventions of aging and entreated mothers to use the product to keep “young and vital” for the sake of their families. In an ad from September 1926 (Fig. 3.2), the headline reads, “But, Mother, *your* mother looked so *old* at your age.”<sup>62</sup> The ads address mothers directly to also invoke the changing standards of beauty and youth using the supposed voices of daughters. One version of these ads (Fig. 3.4) led with the tagline, “Is *your* daughter proud of her mother?”<sup>63</sup> These ads allowed Lysol to use the concept of “daughters” as a foil to address women about supposed modern norms and to play on the emotional connections between mothers and daughters as a selling strategy. The ad copy often played upon mothers’ fears of not appearing youthful to their grown daughters, or of being left out of a crucial conversation with their daughters about how to protect themselves and their children.

Lysol manipulates the emotions of mothers who want to be seen as both modern and able to keep up with their grown daughters. The visual elements of the ads are in line with the rhetorical messages of pregnancy avoidance to protect existing children and grown daughters who may become pregnant. The use of aspirational images and copy that emulates the mother-



daughter relationship allows Lysol to influence the emotions of the reader, as well as invoke the changing conventions of motherhood as a way to sell more product.

## **Conclusion**

The trope of motherhood provided a strategy for Lysol to reach women who were concerned not only with their own fertility, but also made responsible for the fertility of their daughters and other important women in their lives. Lysol reinforces these ideas in three ways: first, by emphasizing the importance of mothers remaining “young” and “vital,” second, by highlighting that Lysol was scientifically “safe” and “sure,” and finally by using daughters as indexes for aspirational motherhood. The shift in the norms of motherhood allowed Lysol to argue that it was not just a product, but a solution in the lives of women and that this solution was based in the authority of science. Cultural beliefs about motherhood worked to create a specific climate in which advertisers were able to rhetorically craft messages to sell a product that was officially not for sale in this country, and as well as convincing women that the product was to their benefit. Lysol did not only use the strategy of aspirational images and idealized personas to appeal to mothers, however. In the next chapter, I explore the strategies Lysol used to further exploit women’s self-doubt about marriage and romantic love. While the norms of marriage in this country were changing radically in this time period, Lysol exploited the cultural zeitgeist to promote a product that did not provide the expected return on the promise of safety and security for women.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> “I asked my mother those very same questions- she didn’t have this little book,” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, October 1927, 185.

<sup>2</sup> “Read this book carefully dear...” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, February 1927, 201.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 138-39.

<sup>4</sup> “Five...going on two,” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, August 1935, 103.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Ruth Berkin and Mary Beth Norton, *Women of America: A History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Berkin and Norton, *Women of America*, 145.

<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 87.

<sup>9</sup> See Catherine Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1845).

<sup>10</sup> Sara Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1989), 62.

<sup>11</sup> Janice Williams Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 125.

<sup>12</sup> Plant, *Mom*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 142- 42. “Women’s Sphere” is defined by Evans as traditional values that kept women in the home and out of public life. Of course, this “sphere” only applied to middle class or wealthy white women, a fact that was well-pointed out in Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a woman” speech.

<sup>14</sup> Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 67-92.

<sup>15</sup> Plant, *Mom*, 87.

<sup>16</sup> Plant, *Mom*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Johnson, *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen’s Advertising Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Scholars credit Catharine Beecher for starting the efficiency movement. She advocated for formal education for women in housekeeping and child care. Beecher was quickly followed by other efficiency experts, including Christine Frederick. Frederick made her living teaching other women how to be better consumers. For more information about the efficiency movement see Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*.

<sup>20</sup> Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, 36-39.

<sup>21</sup> Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, 1-7.

<sup>22</sup> Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*, 33-34.

<sup>24</sup> “Lysol protected both”, *McCall’s*, January 1927, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Plant, *Mom*, 2-3.

<sup>26</sup> “Is your daughter proud of her mother?” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, February 1927, 187.

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- <sup>27</sup> "At forty, life is just beginning for the modern woman," *Hearst's Cosmopolitan*, October 1923, 175.
- <sup>28</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1998), 140-41.
- <sup>29</sup> "Modern women find this booklet of vital importance," *Cosmopolitan*, March 1925, 207.
- <sup>30</sup> "But, mother, your mother looked so old at your age," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, September 1926, 177.
- <sup>31</sup> "Women who know say: Tell every woman," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, August 1925, 195 and "Must women begin to fade at thirty..." *Cosmopolitan*, August 1923, 165.
- <sup>32</sup> "Must women begin to fade at thirty- or even forty?" *Cosmopolitan*, August 1923, 165.
- <sup>33</sup> "Keeping stride with her sons and daughters," *Cosmopolitan*, March 1924, 161, and "The mother whose children are happy at home," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, June 1926, 197.
- <sup>34</sup> "Keeping stride with her sons and daughters," *Cosmopolitan*, March 1924, 161.
- <sup>35</sup> "The mother whose children are happy at home," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, June 1926, 197.
- <sup>36</sup> "Is your daughter proud of her mother?" *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, February 1926, 187.
- <sup>37</sup> "Keeping stride with her sons and daughters," *Cosmopolitan*, March 1924, 161.
- <sup>38</sup> "The mother whose children are happy at home," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, June 1926, 197.
- <sup>39</sup> "Modern women find this booklet of vital importance," *Cosmopolitan*, March 1925, 207.
- <sup>40</sup> For an example of the medical communities use of this term see: John Burns *The Anatomy of the Gravid Uterus: with Practical Inferences Relative to Pregnancy and Labour* (Glasgow, University Press, 1799).
- <sup>41</sup> "The mother whose children are happy at home," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, June 1926, 197.
- <sup>42</sup> I use science with a capital "S" to indicate the authority reserved for science at this time. The claims made by Lysol that they were "scientific" would not have been borne out by any scientific lab, but invoking the trope had meaning because of the aura and growing authority of the scientific developments of the twentieth century.
- <sup>43</sup> "You, too, can retain your charm and health through the years," *Cosmopolitan*, April 1923, 165.
- <sup>44</sup> "But, mother, your mother looked so old at your age," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, September 1926, 177.
- <sup>45</sup> "Women who know say: Tell every woman," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, August 1925, 195.
- <sup>46</sup> Amy Sarch, "Dirty Discourse: Birth Control Advertising in the 1920s and 1930s" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1994), 21.
- <sup>47</sup> "Are women growing younger?" *Cosmopolitan*, December 1923, 153.
- <sup>48</sup> Shara Vostral, *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Technology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), 1-8.
- <sup>49</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 1986), 18.
- <sup>50</sup> "Read this book carefully dear..." *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, February 1927, 201.

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<sup>51</sup> “I asked my mother those very same questions – she didn’t have this little book,” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, October 1927, 185.

<sup>52</sup> “I asked my mother those very same questions – she didn’t have this little book,” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, October 1927, 185.

<sup>53</sup> For information about Zonite, see Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 163-65.

<sup>54</sup> “Keeping stride with her sons and daughters,” *Cosmopolitan*, March 1924, 161.

<sup>55</sup> “I asked my mother those very same questions – she didn’t have this little book,” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, October 1927, 185.

<sup>56</sup> “Lucky Bride...to have a married sister!” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, February 1929, 183.

<sup>57</sup> Women of means would have had access to European forms of birth control, including diaphragms and sponges which were illegal to import, but women who had the money were able to ascertain. For more information about European birth control history see Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> “The mother whose children are happy at home,” *Hearst’s International- Cosmopolitan*. June 1926, 197.

<sup>59</sup> “Lysol protected them both,” *McCall’s*, January 1927, 61.

<sup>60</sup> “Lysol protected them both,” *McCall’s*, January 1927, 61.

<sup>61</sup> “Keeping stride with her sons and daughters,” *Cosmopolitan*, March 1924, 161.

<sup>62</sup> “But, mother, your mother looked so old at your age,” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, September 1926, 177.

<sup>63</sup> “Is your daughter proud of her mother?” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, February 1926, 187.

## Chapter 4

“A doleful catastrophe to her husband”: Lysol and the Ideal Wife

*Happiness in marriage...may be wrecked by fear- in many young  
wives the fear of pregnancy. This fear becomes a reality...  
romance cannot live or bloom where fear and discontent thrive like  
weeds.*

- Margaret Sanger, *Happiness in Marriage*, 1926

The previous chapter explained the changing conventions of motherhood in the U.S., and how mothers were prized by advertisers as a desired audience. It was not only mothers, however, who were targeted by admen and manufacturers. Women who had yet to have children or simply desired to be married at some point in their adult lives were also targeted audiences of Lysol ads. The narrative of changing motherhood in the U.S. was related to the changing social attitudes toward marriage in this time period. Marriage and courtship were contested spaces as the norms of companionate marriage and the emergence of dating clashed with the previous social rituals of courtship and Victorian norms of marriage. Lehn and Fink's advertising campaign for Lysol addressed the cultural undercurrents of marriage and the justifiable fear that many women felt about multiple pregnancies and marital strife. According to Arlene Skolnick, a major social upheaval was in progress between 1880 and World War I as society broke with Victorian norms of sexuality and marriage: “The middle class young people, especially women, who came of age during those years were increasingly likely to question what they saw as suffocating Victorian assumptions about sexuality, gender and decorum.”<sup>1</sup> These changing social norms were happening across the globe, not just in the U.S., as the economic circumstances of Western societies changed. Movement of large numbers of young people to urban centers for work and unchaperoned dating behavior allowed for pre-marital sexual contact between young,

unchaperoned men and women in ways that never would have been permitted under Victorian social customs. Cissie Fairchilds describes how attitudes toward women's sexuality changed and influenced a rise in children born out of wedlock in Britain and Europe, which illustrates the shifting landscape of marriage across the Western world.<sup>2</sup> Young people in dire economic straits were forced to prolong plans for marriage, and as a result, children were often born to these couples before legal marriage occurred. As the younger generation in the U.S. continued to move from rural areas to cities to seek work, many found themselves on unchaperoned dates in public spaces. U.S. attitudes about courtship were being interrogated at the national level. Before 1920, most courtship took place in the homes of watchful parents and chaperones were required for any courting that took place outside of the home as a way to protect the reputations of young people, especially daughters. Women continued to be culturally positioned as responsible for controlling access to sex both inside and outside of wedlock. The medical field promoted the canard that women did not enjoy or desire sexual contact, but women were starting to question that narrative. In addition, the companionate marriage movement, which prescribed a fulfilling sex life for both partners, shone a bright light on women's sexuality for young women. Changing attitudes towards women's sexuality, changing norms of marriage, and a move toward more permissive social norms, including cinematic influence on U.S. norms of romantic love, as well as burgeoning social acceptance of birth control, created an environment in which advertisers were able to prey on the fears of women and trade on the romantic notions of companionate marriage. In this chapter, I examine messages presented in Lysol douche ads that address issues of marriage. I have identified sixteen ads that address women on the subject of marriage. The ads portray marriage in both a positive and negative light in an effort to address women and to entice women to purchase Lysol as part of their marital needs. These ads appeared throughout the Lysol

campaign in both *McCall's* and *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*. Lehn and Fink's campaign addressed women in different ways, but always assumed women to be the primary audience for both feminine hygiene and marriage concerns. As I will show, the ads invoke changing cultural norms about marriage as a way to play upon women's existing fears of pregnancy, infidelity, and divorce. While one might assume that Lysol was using a fear appeal to scare women into buying its product, in reality the fear of pregnancy was altogether real for the women who knew and dreaded the consequences of multiple unwanted pregnancies or death in childbirth; so the intended audience of the ad saw the fear as justifiable as opposed to a scare tactic. Additionally, women who worried about infidelity, and subsequent disease transmission, already had fears of contracting an illness and would have been justifiably seeking ways to keep disease-free. Lysol did not create the fear of pregnancy or venereal disease. Instead, Lysol capitalized on women's existing fears to sell its product.

As norms of courtship changed to dating, the cinema also played heavily into the development of romantic marriage ideals, especially for young women. Lysol and other advertisers used romantic love appeals liberally in their calls to women to stay "young and healthy" for their husbands by avoiding pregnancy, but also used fear appeals to admonish women to avoid divorce or infidelity on the part of their husbands by avoiding "calendar fears" and engaging in sexual intercourse without fear of pregnancy to keep their husbands happy. As noted in other chapters of this study, women were thought to be responsible for all matters related to reproduction. But these ads also show that women were being positioned as the party responsible for the welfare of their romantic, companionate marriages as well. The rhetorical strategies that Lysol used to address women often played to fears of pregnancy, but could also imply liberation for women who were able to escape fears of pregnancy. The Lehn and Fink

company relied on the justifiable fear of pregnancy to introduce additional fears of marital discord and infidelity if women were not able to perform the romantic marriage norms of the day, which were influenced by Hollywood and by the companionate marriage movement. The ads frequently presented the problem of pregnancy as only solvable by wives through use of feminine hygiene products. Husbands were never cited as the party that could intervene in the loss of romantic marriage norms, but rather were presented as incapable of fidelity if their “sexual needs” were not catered to. This also hints to the avoidance of disease by keeping one’s husband faithful. Additionally, as the sexual relationship took on an increasing role in marital satisfaction, as opposed to merely a reproductive role, Lysol exploited fears women may have had about the smell or taste of their genitals. This concern is not addressed in direct terms in the ads, but the societal shame of having a vagina has been well documented.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I provide a historical overview of the development of companionate marriage, the growing problem of divorce and the effects of the cinema on U.S. conceptions of marriage. I argue that Lysol did more than exploit the justifiable fear of pregnancy, along with divorce, disease, and infidelity, to scare women into buying its product; by analyzing the construction of women in the ads it is possible to see how Lysol was working to sell its image of the perfect wife as well.

### **From Courtship to Dating**

The industrial revolution, growing consumer demands, and changing social conventions helped to push the norms of dating into a new, less restrictive environment for young people who were on their own for the first time.<sup>4</sup> With the mass migration of young people to factories and shops for employment away from their family homes, courtship rituals began to happen more often in public as opposed to private homes. While those of higher economic status were still



able to entertain at home, their children were also interested in the changing conventions of dating, as opposed to the rituals associated with courting, and sought out opportunities to date outside the home. As Eva Illouz notes in her work about romantic love and consumption, leisure time and household consumption both increased in the early part of the twentieth century:

Middle class household consumption and the consumption of nonessential (“superfluous” or “luxury”) goods had already risen by the middle of the nineteenth century. As per-capita income grew, spending on leisure increased even further, accelerated as the workweek decreased. By the 1920s, the eight-hour workday had gone into wide effect, and by 1935, the average American was spending 8 percent of total income on recreation. These new leisure activities took place within the newly expanded cities. In small towns amusements continued to be traditional and informal, but big cities witnessed a spectacular development of commercial amusements. This trend was accentuated by the emergence of a national advertising system that became a major force pushing the American economy toward a mass market of consumption.<sup>5</sup>

Elaine Tyler May argues that the advent of women participating in such amusements was a relatively recent development. In the 1880s, it was only men who were allowed to seek outside entertainment, including men’s clubs and taverns. Women adhered to the tenets of separate spheres and did not seek outside entertainment. However, by the 1920s women were commonly participating in leisure amusements.<sup>6</sup> While young couples were out enjoying these new entertainments, the face of American courtship and marriage was also radically changing.

By the 1920s, “dating” was the preferred method of courtship.<sup>7</sup> The advent of the affordable automobile gave daters unprecedented time alone, and the cinema became a place to both view socially acceptable representations of romantic love, and engage in sexual behavior such as petting.<sup>8</sup> Dating opened the door for many relational and social changes for American young people, but still enforced class, race, heterosexual, and gendered criteria on those who participated, especially through the influence of anxious middle class parents who sought to protect their children’s (especially daughter’s) virtue.

Couples who dated were participating in the development of American youth culture, which fostered budding consumer behavior for both men and women.<sup>9</sup> Kathy Peiss explains how the growing financial and educational independence of women and the coeducational campuses of colleges gave young couples increasing freedom and further weakened the Victorian ideology of courtship. Instead, daters were indoctrinated into what Peiss has termed the “heterosocial” world for American working class women which included a focus on romantic love, sexuality between men and women, and the ability to choose one’s own matrimonial life as a path to conjugal happiness and life bliss- as opposed to an ideology of separate spheres, which actively discouraged intimacy between unmarried men and women.<sup>10</sup>

The focus on the development of intimate relationships with the opposite sex, perhaps in a serial monogamous fashion, gave young adults more control over their social lives and removed the locus of control from parents. Young women and men were instructed to adhere to strict dating guidelines, including the cultivation of a fun-loving persona, consumption of additional personal hygiene goods, and the development of a “proper” wardrobe for a variety of amusements. Dating was to be primarily fun at the beginning and eventually to culminate in a true love relationship ultimately ending in marriage, but daters were free to change partners often and often encouraged not to become too intimate too early in the relationship to avoid heartbreak. Dating was also a popularity contest with the most attractive dates being those who were most popular at school or fit the standards of beauty of the time. Men and women were still controlled by stringent gender roles that instructed women to be the passive sex and wait to be asked for dates and to “improve” their femininity through consumer behavior. Men were to be the relational aggressors, both socially and sexually. Men were also to provide most of the

financial backing for the relationship, and to “keep a girl” they needed to provide amusements and fun.

Dating was characterized as seeking out places to go in public, as opposed to home visits with parental oversight.<sup>11</sup> Young, single women were constrained by the social convention to not allow single men into their boarding houses or rented rooms, and of course were not allowed to visit the homes of men unescorted, lest they ruin their reputations. The advent of leisure time was both a boon to dating and a capitalist enterprise that afforded the new and growing market for entertainment.

## **The Cinema**

The cinema had great influence on the move from private home courtship to public dating behavior, both through an idealization of romantic love in plotlines as well as a physical location for dating to take place. While the nickelodeon era of early movies offered bawdy and cheap entertainment primarily for the working classes, the 1910s ushered in moralistic censorship and attracted new middle class audiences to the cinema. Peiss relates, “As the movies developed a middle-class audience, they transformed the cultural traditions of cheap theater and nickelodeons, which had played with sexual expressiveness and heterosocial practices of “Americanized” working-class youth, into a new ethos of romantic companionship and mass consumption.”<sup>12</sup> Studies of Hollywood cinema acknowledge the importance of movies to U.S. conceptions of romantic love, finding that 85% of all Hollywood films made before 1965 had romantic love as their main plot point, and that often romantic love movie plotlines end with a wedding rather than representing marriage in the movies.<sup>13</sup> German sociologist Niklas Luhman’s work *Love as Passion* documents the important cultural component of the history of romantic

love and marriage as marriage norms changed over time.<sup>14</sup> The cinema was not just influencing American youth through romantic plotlines, but also as an escape from parental oversight. Cinema “dates” became more and more popular as entertainment for young, working couples who had limited resources, as the cinema was a much less expensive mode of entertainment than the theatre, dancehall, or other popular pastimes.

The appeal of the cinema extended beyond just viewing a romantic plotline on the screen, however. The U.S. media promoted the lives of individual movie stars along with their current films. Elaine Tyler May’s work on marriage and divorce in Los Angeles clearly delineates the influence of Hollywood on U.S. ideals of romance and marriage. She names this fascination with Hollywood characters and happy ending expectations “the Hollywood style.”<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that Hollywood both set the standard, and alternatively, produced what they thought Americans would buy. Nevertheless, it is clear that Hollywood standards of romance did influence notions of romantic love and marriage. Tyler May looks to the marriage of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, both Hollywood movie stars, to illuminate the standards of the Hollywood style:

One of the most dramatic expressions of this modern domestic style emerged with the union of two of Hollywood’s most adored screen stars of the teens...In 1920, they each obtained a divorce in order to marry the other. The stigma of scandal from the suggestion of adultery leading to the divorces quickly wore off, and the new union was declared, “the most successful and famous marriage the world has ever known.” Throughout the twenties, “Doug and Mary” were the focus of much attention; dozens of articles described their home and lifestyle.<sup>16</sup>

The enviable lifestyle that Pickford and Fairbanks exhibited included a large Hollywood estate with every technological comfort and a staff to cater to their every whim. Stories about their home often highlighted their successful consumer lifestyle as well as the exclusion of outside contact with the world. The couple had succeeded in “the creation of a totally self-contained

private universe.”<sup>17</sup> It was more than just the house that attracted the attention of the nation though; it was the youth and beauty of Mary and the athletic good looks of Doug that located them as the poster children of youth culture marriage. While the Pickford/ Fairbanks marriage did eventually end in divorce, it illustrates the illusion of many movie stars’ lives in the media that the happy ending extended beyond the screen and into their home lives and marriages as well.

Divorce records from Los Angeles County also indicate a growing emphasis on youth and beauty in marriage. According to Tyler May, in the 1880s, complaints about personal appearance and youthfulness did not appear in the court records for divorce for Los Angeles County, but by the 1920s these complaints became more commonplace in divorce proceedings, especially if the complainant was a man.<sup>18</sup> The focus on appearance both as a personal hygiene concern and as a wardrobe concern indicate the influence of mass consumer culture, including advertising, as well as the influence of the cinema and media surrounding the lives of movie stars.

Although the average U.S. young adult in a small town had little to no access to the expensive and spectacular consumer goods of many movie stars before the advent of the movie house, the country was rapidly evolving with additional leisure time and disposable income, more and more young adults looked to the movies as a place for entertainment, but also for social norms and relationship role models: “By 1920, then, a moderate amount of leisure and amusement was considered good healthy fun for both sexes, provided it did not interfere with domestic responsibilities, and as long as both spouses shared the inclination equally.”<sup>19</sup> This shift in expectations for personal happiness and actions on the part of both sexes indicated a gradual shift in marriage roles for both men and women, many of which played out on the big screen for

all dating young people to absorb. Given that the plot lines of many movies ended with marriage, many daters were compelled to see marriage as a goal of romantic love, but the happy ending promised by the studio system was often more difficult and problematic than young couples bargained for as the definition of marriage itself was being contested by many who wished to revolutionize marriage as a companionate relationship as opposed to a strict gendered understanding of the roles of men and women in matrimony.

### **Companionate Marriage**

As the role of work in society changed, so did the design of the American family. As Gayle Rubin points out, marriage and sexuality are human constructs subject to change over time: “The realm of sexuality also has its own internal politics, inequities, and modes of oppression. As with other aspects of human behavior, the concrete institutional forms of sexuality at any given time and place are products of human activity.”<sup>20</sup> While modern U.S. societal constructions of marriage would point to the traditional breadwinner model of a family as a father who works, a mother who manages the household (and may or may not work outside the home) and children who are free to engage in leisure as the traditional family norm, this is actually an uncommon and fleeting arrangement.<sup>21</sup> Instead, most U.S. families before the Industrial Revolution involved all members of the family working to ensure survival. U.S. farmers often had great numbers of children because children were required to keep the family farm running. As the economics of the country shifted from agriculture to industry, the family shifted as well. This shift, according to Arlene Skolnick, had a profound effect on gender and parent child roles.<sup>22</sup>

Victorian marriage norms were well entrenched in the U.S. cultural consciousness, as marriage provided the ultimate form of respectability for both men and women under Victorian sensibilities. According to the Victorian ideal, marriage gave meaning and roles to both sexes that imbued them with domestic bliss and happiness if they would only submit to the ideal.<sup>23</sup> Divorces during this time period were hard to come by, and the stigma against divorce remained consistent.

Additionally, advances in medical science revolutionized the lifespan of the average American. This meant that marriages were longer and parties had higher expectations for the family as a unit. The expected life span changed radically in the twentieth century, and a majority of people “could expect to live out the normal life course of growing up, marrying, having children, surviving with one’s spouse until age fifty.”<sup>24</sup> As Jeffrey Weeks explains, “The Victorian family was the first form in history which was both long lasting and intimate.”<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the family often developed that intimacy through trauma: in Victorian times, the loss of a child or baby was an “almost typical” experience, as well as experiencing the loss of a parent in adolescence or sooner.<sup>26</sup> Families were to turn to each other to survive these traumatic experiences, and the nuclear family took the place of wider communities and kinship networks.

The changing landscape of U.S. marriage was also noticeable in the popular press. As Eva Illouz argues, as the country moved further into capitalistic consumer behavior, the rise of romantic love as a cultural practice took hold: “In capitalism, two parties come together explicitly on the basis of self-interest and mutual economic benefit; transactions are justified by calculating their effects on the ‘bottom line’ of the balance sheet. In romantic love, by contrast, two individuals are bound together by the ‘capacity to realize spontaneity and empathy in an erotic relationship’.”<sup>27</sup> Illouz further argues that romantic love took the place of religious

devotion in the early twentieth century, and that through the process of doing so became elevated to a “supreme” value.<sup>28</sup> As marriage moved from a business transaction for reproductive labor imbued with religious significance to a romantically oriented relationship chosen by the partners and monogamously conceived and consummated, women were often cast as the maintainers of their romantic relationships. The lion’s share of the relational labor in heterosexual marriage still often falls to women.<sup>29</sup> The popular press picked up on the movement toward romantic love in marriage and ran stories that appealed to the changing nature of married love and courtship during this time period. While tabloids had always existed to cater to the romantic notions of women whose lives did not include such romance, the move toward mainstream publications indicated a change in cultural capital, especially for middle class readers. Numerous publications ran articles for and against the merits of new marriage practices that would eventually be called “companionate marriage.”

One important contribution to the popular press characterizations of companionate marriage is Judge Ben Lindsey’s series of essays, originally published in *Redbook*. The essays were collected into a volume called *The Companionate Marriage* in 1937. Marking both an evolution of U.S. marriage norms, and the intense religious and societal pushback against the loosening of conservative marriage values, Lindsey describes his conception of the companionate marriage as “legal marriage with legalized birth control and the right to divorce by mutual consent for childless couples, usually without payment of alimony.”<sup>30</sup> While many religious authorities responded with ire to the concept and public discussion of companionate marriage, most of the furor seemed to be directed to the issue of birth control. Lindsey describes his debates with a local religious leader in the forward of *Companionate Marriage* and his conclusion is that while people, especially college students, often agreed with his assertions, the



issues raised by religious leaders had more to do with gender discrimination and a desire to control non-procreative sexual behavior. A family court judge in Denver, Lindsey recounts his conversation with a religious leader who was published in the same issue of *Redbook* to assuage more conservative readers who threatened to cancel their subscriptions:

Marriage is, after a fashion, a trades union of women for their own protection. The prostitute and the vamp are the scabs who underbid the union wage. When men begin to believe ... that is cheaper to buy milk than keep the cow, their discovery is a sad one for those among the dairy maids who have begun to discover now and then a grey hair in their comb... Married women will do well to reserve their union cards, and to keep their dues well paid, and also keep up the high quality of their goods. They have competition.<sup>31</sup>

This characterization of women as members of a union who need to keep up their dues (and looks) is at the heart of conversations about how marriage was changing during this period. Given the particular political and religious climate, it is not surprising that many young couples wanted to control their fertility, but felt that their options to do so were very limited, and therefore turned to products like the Lysol douche.

The focus on women maintaining their physical youth and beauty to stave off divorce was not only being espoused by conservatives who had a vested interest in maintaining the socio-cultural and religious status quo. Advertisers were also warning women of the dire circumstances of ill-purchasing decisions and the lack of consumer interest. Lysol was only one of many companies that traded on the fear of being alone or the loss of romance (and status) in marriage in its ads to women. With ads that admonished women to stay young, healthy, and sexually available to save their marriages or become marriageable at all, it is clear that women received heavy pressure from many sources to engage in consumer practices. The ads that I examined for this category featured two kinds of ads, ads featuring married couples and those that featured physicians. Ads that featured married couples provided both aspirational images

and stories, and frightful warnings. Ads that featured physicians positioned physicians not primarily as scientists or clinicians, but as marriage counselors who warned women of the consequences of not using Lysol.

*l-Cosmopolitan for August, 1928*

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"Bates and  
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Bill McCall.

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## "What have I done?"

**N**O LONGER have they anything in common. He takes little interest in his home, or in her.

Her listlessness, her lack of vivacity have gradually taken the joy out of their marriage. She doesn't know what has caused it. Neither does he.

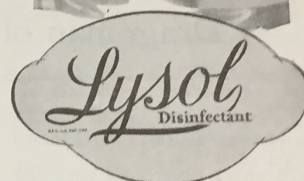
Very often that loss of energy and vitality during the years following marriage is the wife's own fault. And the pity of it is, in this enlightened day, the remedy is so simple, in a great many cases—sane habits of living plus the *correct* practice of feminine hygiene.

Do you know the facts about this vital subject?

Feminine hygiene incorrectly practiced—or the use of the wrong disinfectant—may have irreparable consequences.

Realizing this, the makers of "Lysol" Disinfectant offer you, free, a little book which tells the truth frankly, simply, explicitly, about this modern health safeguard which science has brought to women. Send the coupon below. The booklet will reach you in a plain envelope.

But while waiting for the booklet to arrive, don't take dangerous risks. Buy a bottle of "Lysol" Disinfectant at your druggist's today. Complete directions come with every bottle.



Made by Lysol, Incorporated, a division of Lehn & Fink Products Company. Sole distributors Lehn & Fink, Inc., Bloomfield, N. J. In Canada, Lysol (Canada) Limited. Distributed by Lehn & Fink (Canada) Limited.

"Lysol" Disinfectant is sold at retail only in the brown bottle packed in the yellow carton.

© Lehn & Fink, Inc., 1928

LEHN & FINK, Inc., Sole Distributors  
Bloomfield, N. J. Department 161

Please send me, free, your booklet,  
"The Scientific Side of Health and Youth."

Name..... City.....

Street..... State.....

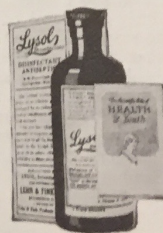


Figure 4.1. "What have I done?" Hearst's International- Cosmopolitan, August 1928

### Ads Featuring Married Couples

The ads featuring married couples primarily featured one of two strategies: either positive visualization in which the wife performs as the ideal wife or negative visualization in which the wife does not embody the role of the ideal wife and therefore suffers the consequences. Women are presented as the only party in the marriage who can provide a solution to the issues faced by couples who wished to enact the norms of romantic marriage and reduced family size. Many of the ads addressed issues of pregnancy in a euphemistic way. As figure 4.1 above proclaims, “‘What have I done?’ No longer do they have anything in common. He takes little interest in his home or her. Her listlessness, her lack of vivacity have gradually taken the joy out of their marriage.”<sup>32</sup> It would have been easy for most readers to see that the phrasing of “listlessness” and “her lack of vivacity” directly address issues of being pregnant. The ad could also be interpreted as addressing women who avoided sex because of the fear of pregnancy. The ads do not admonish men to take better care of their “listless” wives or tell women that a “lack of vivacity” is normal during pregnancy; instead, women are positioned as solely responsible for the state of their marriages. Additionally, men are not addressed as the party who will refuse sex because of pregnancy fear. Rather, women are told that giving into fear of pregnancy and avoiding sex will result in losing their husbands to divorce or infidelity. This strategy played into the cultural norms of companionate marriage. Conversely, positive ads make claims about what the “ideal” wife already does. The women representing the ideal wife are aspirational in their clothing, housing, and physical attractiveness. The ads portrayed these relationships as continuously romantic and intimate. Women who do not fit the ideal are portrayed as being left alone by their spouses or neglected due to their inability or unwillingness to engage in sex with their spouses, raising the specter of infidelity or divorce for women who did not comply with the

image of the ideal, available wife. Many of the Lysol ads preyed on women's insecurity about their marriages, and the detrimental effect that both abstinence and pregnancy could have for their relationships. Especially interesting is the copy of the ads, which allude to the domestic crisis which will ensue if women are not able to properly take care of their "wifely duties." As women were widely considered to be responsible for matters of birth control, none of the ads presents men with a solution to marital problems. Men are not advised to reduce their interest in intercourse or make do with the outcomes of multiple pregnancies. Therefore, women were able to read the ad beyond the copy also to see the euphemisms of protection and security also as a safeguard for their relationships. Advertisers also told women that constant worry about pregnancy would keep them from "being the girl he married" and lead to "spending evenings alone." The fear that young husbands denied sex by their wives as a way to avoid pregnancy would seek sex elsewhere was a popular trope in the Lysol campaign, which may have alluded to husbands contracting venereal diseases by engaging in extramarital sex. As Andrea Tone explains, these advertisements presented and elaborated on the gory detail of probable mishaps and proposed the only solution as consumption of feminine hygiene products: "Having divulged the ugly and myriad hazards of unwanted pregnancy while saddling women with the burden of its prevention, advertisements emphasized that peace of mind and marital happiness were conditions only the market could bestow. In the imagined world of contraceptive advertising, feminine hygiene was the commodity no modern women could afford to be without. Fortunately, none had to. The path to unbridled happiness was only a store away."<sup>33</sup> Women were the target of all of these kinds of messages, which created a situation in which the only possible solution presented for avoiding becoming a boring, dried up, old spinster, was to buy and use the Lysol douche to fulfill the duty of being a good wife.<sup>34</sup> Lysol's advertising relied on the tactic of the

ideal wife to get their message across to a public that was already potentially facing economic insecurity in their early married life or as immigrants in a new country, and therefore may have been more vulnerable to purchase of ineffective products in desperation to salvage their marriages and homes.<sup>35</sup>

The second category of ads featured advice from supposed “eminent” gynecologists or physicians, who appealed mainly to women as the primary party responsible for fertility and marital happiness. These ads relied heavily on authority from so-called physicians and purported to give marital advice from these authority figures. These ads use a strategy of liberation to entice women to buy Lysol, explaining that if they use Lysol they can be free of the worries of pregnancy which will be good for their health and their marriages. The ads rely heavily on the authority given to the institution of medicine in the U.S. at this time period, but also only feature women physicians, which has interesting gender implications. While the ads rely on the authority of medicine, they are actually giving advice that has to do with marriage, not medicine. Below, these two types of ads are examined in greater detail.

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# Ten years after

SHE takes as much enjoyment in sitting out in the brisk November air and watching a football game as he does. They are still young together, after ten years of married life.

She has protected her health and youth by sane habits of living and the correct practice of feminine hygiene. She has regularly used "Lysol" Disinfectant for this delicate part of her toilette—as so many thousands of fastidious women do.

"Lysol" Disinfectant has been the standard for feminine hygiene for nearly forty years. Though other preparations have been put on the market, its position of leadership has never been challenged.

Send for the free booklet offered below, and get the facts about this critical subject. Do not endanger your health by using the wrong disinfectant. Read this booklet prepared by a woman physician and containing professional advice couched in frank, simple language. Send the coupon now.

But while waiting for it to arrive, start the "Lysol" habit. Buy a bottle today at your druggist's. Full directions come with every bottle.

Made by Lysol, Incorporated, a division of Lehn & Fink Products Company. Sole distributors Lehn & Fink, Inc., Bloomfield, N.J. In Canada, Lysol (Canada) Limited. Distributed by Lehn & Fink (Canada) Limited.

## Lysol Disinfectant



LEHN & FINK, Incorporated, Sole Distributors  
Bloomfield, N. J.—Department 177

Please send me, free, your booklet,  
"The Scientific Side of Health and Youth."

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Street \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

©Lehn & Fink, Inc., 1928

Figure 4.2. "Ten years after" *McCall's Magazine*, November 1928

### *Positive Visualization*

Positive visualization ads show aspirational images of couples who were happy and achieving the romantic ideal, exemplified by images showing couples holding hands and gazing into each other's eyes. The copy of these ads often addressed the long term happiness and romance of the pictured marriages. Couples are portrayed in the ads as equals, with imagery that features the couple in the foreground with the man looking attentively at the woman. The implied monogamy of these relationships is front and center. The man and the women are placed in positions of relative equal status. Couples are dressed nicely in clothes that ascribe middle or higher class status. By engaging in active pursuits together, such as attending football games (Fig. 4.2) or the wife playing the role of charming hostess for her husband's business associates, couples are shown to be actively engaging with each other. An ad from *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* in 1926 features a well-dressed woman standing in the doorway of a gracious home meeting what appears to be a business associate of the husband, who stands at her elbow and looks on approvingly. The text of the ad reminds women of their duty to help their husbands succeed in their careers by maintaining their households and their health. The ad copy explains:

Men who rise in life- nine cases out of ten- do so through the help of their wives. Study these wives of successful men, and watch how certain qualities predominate: a social charm and poise, a gracious and interesting vitality. They are women who have learned how to regulate their lives, to give the appropriate time and place to rest, to diet and exercise. They run their daily existence as they run their households and they *keep their bodies in a state of scientific cleanliness*.<sup>36</sup>

Women are given the “opportunity” to become one of these successful wives through their use of Lysol, which is “100% trustworthy.” These aspirational images of successful couples would have been particularly compelling to women who had recently immigrated to the U.S. or to women



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PART of the toilet of the fastidious woman "Lysol" in its preservation of feminine daintiness belongs on the bathroom shelf beside toilet water and talcum. Send coupon for "The Scientific Side of Youth and Beauty," which describes this important quality of "Lysol".



## The ROMANCE that lingers after marriage

A STURDY cable, yet frailer than a butterfly's wing—the romance that lingers after marriage. Women who know, say that it hinges on little things, on gaiety, gentleness, and a certain vitality, the vitality that comes with knowing how to take care of one's self.

Wives of today keep their long youth and vigorous health by a correct regime of living: proper diet, sleeping, exercise, and a state of *scientific bodily cleanliness*. Nervousness, fatigue and weakness quickly result in loss of tone in a woman. Physicians say that health and youth are protected and prolonged by the regular practice of feminine hygiene.

The antiseptic which physicians advocate for feminine hygiene is "Lysol" Disinfectant, the *standard* antiseptic in hospitals and with physicians everywhere. It is called "the ideal antiseptic for feminine hygiene" because it is soothing and lubricating, its effect protective and comforting. It leaves you with a tonic feeling of general well-being.

"Lysol" is three times stronger than powerful carbolic acid, yet so carefully is it blended that in proper proportion it cannot irritate or harm the most sensitive tissues. You can trust every drop of it; absolutely *sure*, it provides perfect protection against infection, while its gentle deodorant qualities are a safeguard of feminine daintiness.

**Let us send you this free booklet  
on the important subject of feminine hygiene**

If you want to know more about the important problems of feminine hygiene, send the coupon below for a free set of the "Lysol" Health Library. One volume, "The Scientific Side of Youth and Beauty" contains a frank discussion on this subject of the preservation of youth.

Get a bottle of "Lysol" today. All drug-stores sell it. Complete directions for its use come in every bottle. Be sure you get the genuine "Lysol" Disinfectant.

**Lysol**  
Disinfectant

Made only by Lysol, Inc. Sole Distributors, LEHN & FINK, INC., Bloomfield, N. J.  
Canadian Agents: Harold F. Ritchie & Co., Ltd., 10 McCaul Street, Toronto

A Division of  
**LEHN & FINK PRODUCTS COMPANY**

Figure 4.3. "The ROMANCE that lingers after marriage" Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan, April 1926


who wished to attain higher social class. The attributes that the ads list, social charm and poise, may have been desired attributes for women who wished to climb the social ladder because they function as class signifiers. Poise and social charm would have been associated with a woman who had the means and education to value such attributes. Charm and poise also allude not so subtly to women who have multiple children who would be less likely to have the sedate lives illustrated in the ads. These ads could be seen as instructive for women who wished to embody the norms of companionate marriage and the ideal wife, but did not have the benefit of such education or family background. The ads also illustrate how women who have fewer children can more easily fulfill the norms of companionate marriage and ascend the social ladder. An ad that ran in April of 1926, also in *Hearst's*, gives further instruction about how the ideal wife behaves. The ad (Fig. 4.3) features a couple seated in a single arm chair in front of the fireplace in a grand home, the husband on the seat of the chair and the wife perched on the arm at his side. The man's attention is directed to the woman, not newspaper in his lap. The couple look intimate and cozy in their comfortable surroundings as the ad copy relays, "A sturdy cable, yet frailer than a butterfly's wing- the romance that lingers after marriage. Women who know, say it hinges on little things, on gaiety, gentleness, and a certain vitality, the vitality that comes with knowing how to take care of one's self."<sup>37</sup> The ad copy here makes it clear to the reader that romance is elusive and fragile if they do not adhere to the appointed behavioral norms of sexual availability and remain pregnancy free or at least able to limit pregnancy. This notion of romantic fragility is further entrenched by the consequences supposedly faced by those women who neglect their duties in the second type of ad that Lysol ran.

### *Negative Visualization*

The second approach to women in this particular category was to present negative images that acknowledged and worked to enhanced women's anxiety about maintaining the ideals of companionate marriage and middle class economics. These ads featured a cautionary tale of what could happen in their marriages if women did not take on the responsibility for avoiding pregnancy or restricted access to sex because of worries or fears. Ads in this vein feature women who are in some way estranged from their husbands because of their lack of knowledge about birth control and therefore lack of sexual availability. Women are the problem in this scenario. The ads do not address that the couple will both be affected, but rather focus on the husband's desire for sex, which Lysol says must be placated to save the marriage and keep the "beauty of the marriage relation."<sup>38</sup> Women are told that they cannot effectively deal with the fear of pregnancy on their own; instead they need to invoke their consumer power to solve this issue. Lysol positions women who are not using Lysol as not living to their true potential and happiness, as well as damaging their marriages. The desire for modern living is reflected on the part of both husband and wife in the ads. As figure 4.4 illustrates, the couple pictured is not experiencing the ongoing romance featured in positive ads. The husband is bent over the wife in a stance that does not look particularly happy. The wife sitting in the arm chair looks as though she is a small child being chided by her parent. Her clothing looks loose and unflattering, similar to the maternity styles of the day. While a full term pregnancy is not visible, the loose-fitting dress and posture of the woman hint at it. The ad copy further elaborates this idea by proclaiming, "a women's health and youthfulness need not fade with marriage."<sup>39</sup> Further, according to Lysol women are wholly responsible for the sad state of their marriages if they do not use Lysol. As an ad from *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* illustrates, "So often a woman

has only herself to blame if she fails to stay young with her husband.”<sup>40</sup> Another ad from August 1927 informs the reader, “The world does not always pity the ‘business widow’ she, too, may be to blame. Neglect by the husband is often the result of the wife’s neglect of herself.”<sup>41</sup> This cautionary tale for women is one that many women might have seen as they observed the relationships of older generations.

**Lysol**  
Disinfectant  
RED U.S. PAT. OFF.



**"You never go out with me  
any more!"**

WHAT a common tragedy those eight words express!

Yet a woman's health and youthfulness need not fade with marriage. Modern science provides a simple protection: Sane habits of living, plus the proper practice of feminine hygiene.

*But be careful in so vital a matter as personal hygiene. Use the disinfectant which is both safe and certain . . . which has been for 30 years the standard disinfectant in hospitals and doctors' offices.*

You cannot afford to experiment. *Only a poison can kill germs.*

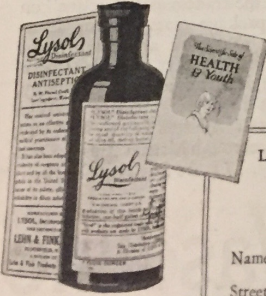
It was "Lysol" Disinfectant which was first associated with the modern practice of feminine hygiene. "Lysol" cleanses as it kills germs.

Preserve your health and youth with "Lysol." Send for the booklet offered below. It is explicit. It was written for women by a woman physician. It has contributed to the peace of mind of thousands. Every woman should be familiar with the facts it presents.

"Lysol" Disinfectant is sold by all druggists.

Made by Lysol, Incorporated, a division of Lehn & Fink Products Company.  
Sole distributors Lehn & Fink, Inc., Bloomfield, New Jersey. In Canada, Lysol (Canada) Limited.  
Distributed by Lehn & Fink (Canada) Limited.

© Lehn & Fink, Inc., 1927



**LEHN & FINK, Inc., Sole Distributors**  
Department 61, Bloomfield, N. J.

Please send me, free, your booklet,  
"The Scientific Side of Health and Youth."

Name .....

Street .....

City ..... State .....

*"Lysol" Disinfectant is never sold in bulk. It comes only in the brown bottle packed in the yellow carton.*

Figure 4.4. "You never go out with me anymore" McCall's, July 1927

Additionally, Lysol's ads played into the Puritanical attitudes Americans had been cultivating since Colonial times, which blamed the spouse for withholding sex as a precursor to infidelity. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman explain that the need for multiple children and the heavy influence of the evangelical church affected American attitudes toward sex within marriage: "Whatever ambivalence colonists had toward premarital sexual relations, they agreed that husbands and wives ought to have sex. For New England Puritans, conjugal union was a duty; if unfulfilled, the neglected spouse might be tempted to commit adultery."<sup>42</sup> This attitude extended past the colonial period in the U.S. Therefore, women and men would have been apprised of these attitudes, and the burgeoning movement toward enjoying sex in marriage through the companionate marriage movement would have also raised the stakes for marital sex.

Returning to the ad above, the reader could see the man in the ad with the golf clubs as standing for modern active life with the rise in leisure time and the expectation of togetherness for spouses, while the woman is firmly entrenched in the Victorian norms of old with her dark clothing and heavy furniture in the background. The images accompanying these negative ads often featured women who were alone and looking forlornly into the middle distance in the absence of their husbands, sometimes in front of a dinner they weren't eating or accompanied by household staff in the background. Many ads used coded language to allude to pregnancy, such as "all tired out early in the day" or "you always want to leave early" in relation to a party or event. Women in the ads who were featured with their husbands often featured the husband as the foreground and the wife in a secondary position next to him or lower than him. The bodily space that women take up in the ads with their husbands serves to reinforce the power dynamic of marriage in which women are responsible for the happiness, active lifestyle and maintenance of the marital union, through avoidance of pregnancy and an active sex life.



One further tactic that advertisers employed was the rhetoric of “liberation” for married women who were seeking to stay young and healthy. Several of the ads touch upon the fact that women without proper “feminine hygiene” habits can seem old before their time, however by using the Lysol douche women are liberated from being old before their time and from the “calendar” worries that young married women face. This focus on women being the problem in their lackluster marriages also gives them agency to fix their marriages through prudent consumption. Similar to other advertiser messages women were receiving messages about consuming “freedom,” messages about consuming feminine hygiene products also had the rhetorical undercurrent of freedom. Ads posited that if women wanted to preserve their freedom, they could use their consuming power to do so.<sup>43</sup> This “double text” often named fear itself as a problem for women. The fear of being pregnant could make women weak and sick, advertisers told women; therefore, the use of the Lysol douche was a safeguard for their health and for their relationships. In the ads, the fear of pregnancy is tied to physical ailments for women who do not practice contraception with Lysol. Lysol asks, “Is recurrent fear aging you, upsetting your health and nerves?”<sup>44</sup> The theme of recurrent fear affecting marriages is further enhanced by questioning the woman’s mental health and knowledge. Although the fear of becoming pregnant is invoked in all the ads, Lysol tells women that their fears are unfounded, if they simply use Lysol. An ad titled, “Must I live my life afraid?” tells women that not using Lysol is either “timid ignorance or neglect” and that “many married women live to learn that their greatest ‘worries’ have been those that never happened.”<sup>45</sup> Lysol even indicates that these are “imaginary fears” in some ads.<sup>46</sup> The ads indicate that some women who are concerned are simply uneducated. As an ad from 1933 explains, “Fear leads them to believe some minor ailment is the start of a major physical crisis,” and again in 1934, “Many married women are like this- some slight feminine

irregularity throws them into a panic; panic may bring on physical symptoms.”<sup>47</sup> This sounds like Lysol is making the claim that women who get upset each month believing that they may be pregnant are exaggerating something that could be very simply handled through using Lysol. This staggering accusation of women’s overdramatic concern about their pregnancy status is very similar to cultural messages which posit that women cannot be rational because they are too emotional. This is a clear example of Lysol talking down to the women that it purported to support.

Ads featuring couples played heavily on women’s dreams of the love and marriage themes promoted by Hollywood and the companionate marriage movement. Women were admonished to keep themselves looking youthful and to avoid “calendar fears” as a way to preserve their own piece of mind and their marriages. The strategy of fear avoidance was taken even further by the second type of ad, ads featuring physicians.

### *Ads Featuring Physicians*

A second rhetorical strategy that the Lysol advertising campaign utilized was to present “advice” from “physicians.” These ads (Fig. 4.5) functioned as a way for Lysol to both give advice with undertones of medical authority on health concerns to women and to reinforce how fear could be a problem in their marriages. While the fear of pregnancy was justified, these ads work to reinforce that fear by appealing to the authority of physicians and medical science. Several of the ads appeal to the use of Lysol as a hospital product and make the claim that Lysol has been used by the medical community as a standard of trustworthiness. A further discussion of the importance of the science in the authoritative rhetoric of the ads is offered in the next chapter. However, the authority of “science,” unfortunately even pseudo-science on the part of



advertisers, was well-respected in the U.S. context following WWI. Given the unavailability of information about these supposed physicians, it is highly likely they were fictional creations of Lehn and Fink. Consumer advocate Rachel Lynn Palmer and physician Sarah K. Greenberg point out significant issues with the “frank talks from eminent women physicians”:

These advertisements were strikingly similar in some respects. For instance, in all that we have seen the doctors quoted were from foreign countries...one would think that America had no gynecologists of distinction; or perhaps American names are not sufficiently bizarre to embellish a Lysol advertisement...Another marked similarity is the sameness of testimonials from these doctors, even in the phrases they use...that doctors of different countries should express themselves in such nearly identical language should certainly be investigated by the society for Psychical Research as a striking illustration of thought transference.<sup>48</sup>

In fact, Andrea Tone explains that a AMA investigation found that none of the physicians quoted in Lysol ads actually existed.<sup>49</sup> The ads were intentionally misleading for women who wished to prevent pregnancy, but did not have access to a physician to ask about it.

NUMBER SIX IN A SERIES OF FRANK TALKS BY LEADING WOMEN PHYSICIANS

## "THE SERENE MARRIAGE...should it be jeopardized by needless fears?"



Dr. Madeline Lion, widely recognized gynecologist of Paris. Head of the Laboratories Ducatte. Associated with the Obstetrical and Gynecological Clinic, Hotel Dieu Hospital, Paris. Consultant in Gynecology at Salpetriere Hospital, Paris.

"It amazes me, in these modern days, to hear women confess their carelessness, their lack of positive information, in the so vital matter of feminine hygiene. They take almost anybody's word... a neighbor's, an afternoon bridge partner's... for the correct technique of personal antisepsis, for the dependability of a germicide. And yet this subject concerns so intimately their health, their looks, the precious happiness of married life!

"They suffer exhausting fear periodically, just from lack of confidence in the precautions they take for intimate cleanliness—when that very fear is itself enough to disturb normal regular functioning of organs so sensitive to emotional tension, to worry!

"Surely in this question of correct marriage hygiene, the modern woman should accept only the actual facts of scientific research and medical experience. The woman who *does* demand such facts uses "Lysol" faithfully in her ritual of personal antisepsis.

"Lysol" is absolutely dependable in its disinfectant action. In my own work I have seen its long record of proven effectiveness both in laboratory analysis and in clinical use. I employ "Lysol" in my obstetrical and gynecological practice. I specify "Lysol" for my patients.

"Lysol" is soothing, healing to delicate membranes, where other agents of like strength are caustic, irritating. "Lysol" has low surface tension (which means effective penetration of skin crevices) and high germicidal effect (which means positive check to the most vigorous bacteria). Its regular use is a safeguard not only against real health risks but against the *imagined* fears that ruin the mental peace and the beauty of the marriage relation for so many women."

(Signed)  
Dr. MADELAINE LION

LEHN & FINK, Inc., Bloomfield, N. J. Dep. C 12

Figure 4.5. "The serene marriage" *McCall's*, December 1932

The women featured were not only supposedly physicians, but European physicians from medical institutions in Vienna, Germany and especially Paris, France. The connection to Europe was probably two-fold. First, women were unlikely to know that these women were not doctors when the likelihood of having read or heard of them is explained away by the foreign context.

Second, Europe was thought by many Americans to be a home of exotic sexual practices, especially libertine France, and to have knowledge that American women lacked.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, as Margaret Sanger admitted to importing European birth control for her clinics, many women could have developed the opinion that European birth control methods were more advanced than the ones American women knew about.<sup>51</sup>

The ads featured text that appealed to science and purported to provide information about women's health that would keep them free from the fear of pregnancy. The rhetorical strategies of the "science" presented by the ads are addressed at length in a separate section of this study, however, the appeals used by the ads addressing women about their marriages are salient to this section of the study because it directly addresses how women's responsibility for their fertility would impact their marriages. The authority of the messages comes from the texts that allegedly were written by women physicians and from the accompanying photographs that featured women of middle age, in professional dress with uncomplicated hairstyles. The women featured were not the young and beautiful aspirational images of wives, but instead were women who looked exceptionally competent and compassionately addressed the camera as though they were revealing the secret of Lysol as a personal mission to save marriages.

The visuals of these ads are similar. The women pictured are of indeterminate middle age. They are not flashy or wearing the latest fashions. Instead, they seem to represent a neutral confidante that women can depend on for "scientific" advice. Seated at a desk with pen in hand, the women are supposedly writing the words that the audience of the ad is reading. While the photographs do not represent the women as harsh or hostile, there is an air of authority in the copy and visuals. The women look directly into the camera as though they are addressing the reader directly, with copy that leaves no doubt about the "correct" solution to marital discord. In

figure 4.5, the headline of the ad encapsulates the main message of the campaign. “The serene marriage...should it be jeopardized by needless fears?”<sup>52</sup> The copy of the ad makes it abundantly clear that the “physician” featured is an authority on such matters and that women who don’t follow her “advice” are misinformed through their own fault. The ad elaborates, “It amazes me, in these modern days, to hear women confess their carelessness, their lack of positive information, in the so vital matter of feminine hygiene.” This statement makes it clear that women who lack information or who make “careless” choices are themselves responsible for these poor choices. The ad then continues by admonishing women not to take advice from people who are not well-informed. “They take almost anybody’s word...a neighbor’s, an afternoon bridge partner’s...for the correct technique of personal antisepsis.”<sup>53</sup> Under the guise of “medical” advice, women were promised liberation from unhappiness, worry and fear, if they would just use their skill as consumers in a discriminating fashion to choose a good feminine hygiene product. These messages echoed similar rhetoric that was used to sell women other products in this time period, including appliances and automobiles.<sup>54</sup> Women faced pressure to use their consuming and economic power, no matter how slight, to improve the lives of their families.

Lysol also used the fear appeal as a way to appeal to women to preserve their marriages from the beginning. In an ad from December 1933 in *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan* advertised that women could have their “romance born anew” if they would free their marriages from fear by using the Lysol douche.<sup>55</sup> The opportunity to “fix” their marriages may have been particularly enticing to women who wished to avoid the stigma of divorce, and the “advice” found within the ads may have struck a chord with women who were seeking answers because the ads were purported to feature the “frank advice by leading women’s physicians.” The ad

explains that the particular couple in question was able to turn their marriage around: “Yet one month ago, they were the most bitterly unhappy man and wife I have ever seen. The old story. An ideal marriage ...until fear crept in. The fear that begins in a woman’s mind...inspired by some slight feminine irregularity.”<sup>56</sup> The irregularity mentioned refers to the menstrual cycle of the woman who might have suspected pregnancy. The ad offers up the Lysol method a way to reduce these fears and return to the romance of a first or second honeymoon. Additional ads in this series of “frank advice” offered similar solutions to marital woes: “If I could tell the young bride but one thing it would be this: Practice feminine antisepsis faithfully and intelligently...with a safe and reliable antiseptic.”<sup>57</sup> The accompanying picture of a woman at a desk addresses readers with a confident look, her right hand resting on a stethoscope on her desk. The ad goes on to elaborate that feminine hygiene is the antidote to marital woes: “Health is the basis of all happiness in life... and particularly married life. To lose the eager enthusiasm of girlhood shortly after marriage, to grow listless, despondent and irritable under the stern trials and demands of home-making is not only a tragedy to a wife, but a doleful catastrophe to her husband. Yet such is the frequent penalty of neglected marriage hygiene.”<sup>58</sup> It is clear from the text of the ads developed by Lysol that women were not only responsible for fertility control, but also for the success or failure of their marriages.

## **Conclusion**

The fear of pregnancy, according to advertisers like Lysol, only affected women, even though both parents would likely feel the economic cost and burden of a child. In addition, women were addressed as the “keepers” of relationships. There is no mention that men should be concerned about their wives, or keeping their wives happy. This gender bias in the ads speaks to

the prevailing attitudes of the time, but also serves to reinforce these norms. While birth control was marketed to men in the form of condoms in the 1930s, the ads were markedly different in tone and message. Focusing primarily on sexual prowess and masculinity, condoms were marketed solely as a protection from disease, not as birth control.<sup>59</sup> These gendered messages clearly laid out an identity for women as the primary responsible party for all consumption but especially for the consumption and use of birth control.

The Lysol douche campaign encouraged women to buy the douche through a mixture of strategies appealing to justified fear and false claims of authority. The changing social conventions of dating, marriage, and the influence of the cinema had far-reaching implications for individual women's lives and may have made them more susceptible to advertising that romanticized marriage and played into cultural insecurities about the changing role of the family and women's place in the modern world. As the population began to realize the improvements in living conditions emerging after World War I, and many more people could hope to be upwardly mobile, the task of women in this paradigm was to be ardent consumers of products that would keep their homes healthy and clean. This was essentially the same message that women were receiving about their own feminine hygiene, a topic that was rarely advertised or discussed publicly before this time period. As women took on the role of consumer, the cultural messages about women's bodies and place in the world were also changing. While matters of women's bodies had been previously been unmentionable or hidden, the focus on hygienic reform after World War II changed the context of the discussion.<sup>60</sup> Women's roles changed significantly from working outside the home and the move to a scientific model culturally had made previously taboo topics open for scientific inquiry.<sup>61</sup> The growing focus on companionate marriage and both partners' sexual release and pleasure within the confines of a romantic marriage relationship

radically shifted the paradigm of marriage for those who sought to move beyond the Victorian norms and into modernity.

One way that women were pushed to become more modern was through the adaptation of “scientific” housekeeping and adoption of new technologies for their homes. The rise of science in U.S. society had significant impact on the lives of women, whether they were married or not. Breakthroughs in science and technology resulted in longer lifespans, less infant death, and labor reduction for many women in their homes. The advent of home refrigeration and updated practices of home sanitation had many positive outcomes for American families. The authority vested in science created problems for the U.S. consumer though, as many companies coopted the language of science to sell products that were not scientifically valid or sound. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, Lysol was one product that used the authority of science to sell a product that did not meet the approval of the medical community.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Arlene Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise: The American Family in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 41.
- <sup>2</sup> Cissie Fairchilds, "Female Sexual Attitudes and the Rise of Illegitimacy: A Case Study," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* VIII.4, (1978): 627-67.
- <sup>3</sup> For a complete history of the shame of menstruation or owning a vagina, see Sharra L. Vostral, *Under Wraps: A History of Menstrual Hygiene Technology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).
- <sup>4</sup> See Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1989) for a full discussion of the contextual factors of the development of U.S. dating norms.
- <sup>5</sup> Eva Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 27.
- <sup>6</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 81.
- <sup>7</sup> Rodney M. Cate and Sally A. Lloyd, *Courtship* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1992).
- <sup>8</sup> Virginia Wright Wexman, *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage and Hollywood Performance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- <sup>9</sup> Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 27.
- <sup>10</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).
- <sup>11</sup> Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 3.
- <sup>12</sup> Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 162.
- <sup>13</sup> David Borwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production until 1960* (New York: Columbia Press, 1985), 16.
- <sup>14</sup> Niklas Luhman, *Love as Passion: The Commodification of Intimacy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- <sup>15</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 75.
- <sup>16</sup> May, *Great Expectations*, 75-76.
- <sup>17</sup> May, *Great Expectations*, 76.
- <sup>18</sup> May, *Great Expectations*, 77.
- <sup>19</sup> May, *Great Expectations*, 88.
- <sup>20</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Culture, Society, and Sexuality: A Reader*, eds. Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton (London: UCL Press, 1999), 143-78.
- <sup>21</sup> Kingsley Davis, "Wives and Work: A Theory of Sex Role Revolution and its Consequences," in *Feminism, Children and the New Families*, eds. Sanford M. Dornbusch and Myra H. Strober (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 67- 112.
- <sup>22</sup> Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, 12.
- <sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (London: Longman, 1989), 24-25.
- <sup>24</sup> See Peter Uhlberg, "Death and the Family," *Journal of Family History*, 5, no.3 (1980), 313-20. and Phyllis Moen, "Gender, Age and the Life Course," in *The Handbook of Aging and the*



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*Social Sciences*, ed. by Robert Binstock, Linda George, Victor Marshall, George Myers, and James Schultz (San Diego, Academic Press, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., 1996).

<sup>25</sup> Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Skolnick, *Embattled Paradise*, 14.

<sup>27</sup> Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Illouz, *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Francesca M. Cancian and Steve L. Gordon, "Changing Emotion Norms in Marriage: Love and Anger in U.S. Women's Magazines since 1900," *Gender and Society*, 2.3 (1988), 308-42.

<sup>30</sup> Ben Lindsey and Wainwright Evans, *The Companionate Marriage* (New York: Garden City Publishing, 1929), xiii.

<sup>31</sup> Lindsey and Evans, *The Companionate Marriage*, viii

<sup>32</sup> "What have I done?" *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, August 1928, 157.

<sup>33</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 159-60.

<sup>34</sup> The term "spinster" has obvious problematic gendered implications and is only used here as the term that would have been applied at this time for women who were unmarried over a certain age. For more about the problematic nature of the term, and attempts at reclamation of the term for childless women see: Alexandra Hill, "The Childless Woman as Failure; or, the "Spinster Aunt" as Provocation for the Future," *Women in German Yearbook* 30 (2014): 164-74.

<sup>35</sup> Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 344-46.

<sup>36</sup> "The wife of a successful man," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, July 1926, 177.

<sup>37</sup> "The ROMANCE that lingers after marriage," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, April 1926, 179.

<sup>38</sup> "The serene marriage," *McCall's*, November 1932, 87.

<sup>39</sup> "You never go out with me anymore!" *McCall's*, July 1927, 68.

<sup>40</sup> "She looks old enough to be his mother," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, February 1928, 171.

<sup>41</sup> "Detained at the office... again," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, August 1927, 175.

<sup>42</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 23.

<sup>43</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 229-32.

<sup>44</sup> "Another day of suspense", *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, October 1933, 131.

<sup>45</sup> "Must I live my life afraid?", *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, September 1933, 125.

<sup>46</sup> "The trouble, Madame, is not with your heart, but with your head!" *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, April 1934, 165

<sup>47</sup> "Must I live my life afraid?" *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, September 1933, 125, and "The trouble, Madame, is not with your heart, but with your head!" *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, April 1934, 165.

<sup>48</sup> Rachel Lynn Palmer and Sarah K Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds in Women's Hygiene: A Medical Guide Against Misleading Claims and Dangerous Products* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1936), 148-49.

<sup>49</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 163.

<sup>50</sup> D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Eig. *The Birth of the Pill* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 95.

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<sup>52</sup> "The Serene Marriage," *McCalls* December 1932, 87.

<sup>53</sup> "The Serene Marriage," *McCalls*, December 1932, 87.

<sup>54</sup> Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs*, 32-49.

<sup>55</sup> "When marriage is freed of fear," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, December 1933, 323.

<sup>56</sup> "When marriage is freed of fear," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, December 1933, 323.

<sup>57</sup> "If I could tell the young bride but one thing," *McCall's*, September 1932, 98.

<sup>58</sup> "If I could tell the young bride but one thing," *McCall's*, September 1932, 98.

<sup>59</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 181-200.

<sup>60</sup> For a discussion of the predominant Western cultural tropes about the vagina, see V. Braun and S. Wilkinson "Socio-cultural Representations of the Vagina," *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 19.1 (2001): 17-32.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Beth Norton, "American History," *Signs* 5.2 (Winter 1979): 324-37.

## Chapter 5

## “What is your degree of cleanliness?” Lysol and the Pseudo-Scientific Ad

*Bacon, Harvey, Galileo, Decartes and Newton had launched the New Science; the Enlightenment popularized it; but it was the age post 1800s that bankrolled popular science, bringing new manpower, institutions, teaching, training and expectations...Directly and indirectly, medicine benefitted from such transformations. It gained standing for being scientific, and ambitious medical men pressed to learn its procedures and speak its slogans.*  
*-Roy Porter, The Greatest Benefit to Mankind, 1997*

In February 1923, Lehn and Fink ran an ad that addressed women about “cleanliness” and tied Lysol intractably to the medical profession (Fig. 5.1). The copy of the ad reads, “There is the cleanliness that merely looks clean. There is the cleanliness that *is* clean, according to ordinary standards. Then there is the cleanliness that is antiseptically clean- the cleanliness of the hospital.”<sup>1</sup> The ad copy goes on to state that Lysol’s hospital-level antiseptic properties are what make Lysol better than other cleaning products. The more interesting piece of the ad is the sketch that accompanies it. The sketch features a woman in what appears to be her bedroom in her bed clothes. The woman looks at the reader in a direct manner from her perch on the bed. What makes this so interesting is that Lysol is being advertised as a “personal antiseptic,” a product that “brings to the discriminating woman a sense of real satisfaction.”<sup>2</sup> This early ad for Lysol does not use the moniker “feminine hygiene” that would become more popular in later ads. Instead, the woman pictured in her bedroom with an inset of a man in a lab coat using what appears to be a Bunsen burner in the image establishes the beginning of the relationship between Lysol, women’s bodies, and science.

January, 1923

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## What is your degree of cleanliness?

*T*HERE is the cleanliness that merely *looks* clean.

There is the cleanliness that *is* clean, according to ordinary standards.

Then there is the cleanliness that is antiseptically clean—the cleanliness of the hospital. It is this last and highest degree of cleanliness that brings to the discriminating woman a sense of real satisfaction.

This sort of cleanliness requires more than soap and water. It must be attained in the same way that the doctor achieves it—by the use of an effective antiseptic and disinfectant.

Genuine "Lysol" Disinfectant, originally prepared for use by the medical profession, is ideal for every purpose of personal hygiene.

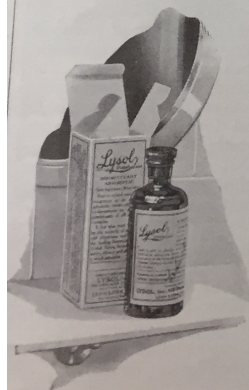
Genuine "Lysol" Disinfectant, in proper solution with water, is not caustic and does not irritate, no matter how often it is used.

Genuine "Lysol" Disinfectant is put up only in brown glass bottles containing 3, 7, or 16 ounces. Each bottle is packed in a yellow carton. Insist on obtaining genuine "Lysol" Disinfectant.

Complete directions for use in every package

Manufactured only by LYSOL, Inc.  
635 Greenwich Street, New York City

Lehn & Fink, Inc., New York  
Sole Distributors



**Lysol**  
Disinfectant  
Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

*An ideal personal antiseptic*

Figure 5.1. "What is your degree of cleanliness" Hearst's International-Cosmopolitan,

February 1923

In this chapter I examine Lysol ads that address the growing interest in and veneration of science by both U.S. advertising and the American public. While the science that Lysol was relying on to address the general public was not in truth scientifically accurate, the pseudo-scientific narrative approach of the ads, as well as the rhetorical design, are significant to understanding the cultural norms of the burgeoning authoritative role of science and the struggle for birth control. As the birth control movement came to be tied to the rise of medicine, there were significant gains and drawbacks to the entangled relationship of science and ideology.

For the purposes of this chapter, I identified thirteen ads that relied heavily on a narrative of science and draw authority from science or physicians. While all of the Lysol ads referenced science by advertising of the booklet that explained how to use Lysol as a douche, the ads identified for this chapter relied primarily on the authority of “science” to make their sales pitch. The ads identified with more than mentioning science; instead, the appeal of science was paramount to the persuasive appeal of the ads. I argue that Lysol used three strategies to appeal to potential consumers: using explicit physician appeals, aligning ad copy with the work of the sanitation movement in the U.S., and attempting to position itself as a disseminator of scarce “scientific” information. The first type of ad relied on physician authority to make an argument about the reliability and trustworthiness of Lysol as a product. These ads were often part of the “frank talks from eminent women physicians” ads briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, although some ads used copy from physicians who were not named or only named as physicians. The second type of ad exploited the public’s familiarity with bacteriology and public health messages to convince the American public of the utility and applicability of Lysol. These ads used terms such as “fastidious” and “meticulous” to align their product with public health messages. Finally, I address the third type of ad in which Lysol worked to position itself as an

arbiter of scarce, but valuable scientific information. These ads peddled Lysol's booklets as a replacement to seeking advice from physicians; instead Lysol was the advice giver with supposedly scientific advice. Using these three strategies, Lysol worked to position its product as one that aligned with changing scientific norms in the U.S. and would provide women with a solution to the problem of birth control, which was rapidly being framed as a medical issue.

While these ads appeared in magazines that were read by men and women, it is clear that Lysol was addressing women in its ads. As I have explained in previous chapters, women were seen to be solely responsible for fertility matters. However, Patricia Johnston explains that although ad men targeted women in their ads, women were not wholesale accepting the messages as a panacea:

Media theorists have suggested that ads work because they reduce the social apprehension created by unstable economic structures, cultural practices, and gender roles in an industrialized and urbanized society- not because they promise women smooth skin or silky hair, and not because the consumer believes she will become rich and famous. The advertisements hypothesize and promise utopia for women and allay women's self-doubts and dissatisfactions. They reduce social problems to the personal and thus make complex problems seemingly simple to solve.<sup>3</sup>

Given the complexity of the birth control question in this time period, Lysol ads invoking scientific narratives promised a simple resolution to a very complex societal problem, as well as providing an authoritative explanation through scientific language and images. While the country was experiencing a rapid expansion in science education, Lysol was offering what seemed to be a solution to a very complex and very difficult problem women faced. As experts across the country pointed to advances in science and medicine, Lysol's rhetoric seemingly used that authority to convince women of its "simple, discrete" solution.

The rise of efficiency experts and advances in medicine in the twentieth century had significant societal consequences for the Western world. Adherence to the tenets of

enlightenment philosophy in the West moved society toward an expansion of individualism-based ideals. As Stephanie Coontz explains,

Enlightenment philosophy held that humans were rational beings whose self-interest could lead them to civic virtue without coercion or religious mystification by rulers. (There was serious question, though, as to whether slaves, women, the lower classes, Native Americans, and the Irish were fully human.) Protestant ideology made individual consequence the final arbiter of moral behavior. Theorists of the emerging market economy argued that under free competition, the self-interest of small producers would interact with consumer choice to yield greater productivity and prosperity for all. In the political realm, supporters of republicanism or democracy attacked the paternalism and deference by which monarchs and aristocracies had ruled, insisting that a moral society could be built only by those who freed themselves from economic and political dependence on such elites.<sup>4</sup>

Modernity radicalized the Western view of religion, science and economics, placing the responsibility for social progress and individual achievement squarely at the feet of the individual. Moreover, the burgeoning consumerism movement continued to gain speed, pushed along by advertisers and merchants who appealed to economic classes previously unable to purchase mass produced goods. This included Lehn and Fink, which relied heavily on “scientific” narratives and terminology to give authority to its products. Lysol ads often emphasized the use of Lysol in hospitals and during childbirth to give credibility to the product. On the copy for each Lysol ad, consumers were advised to send away for a free booklet, which “tells the truth frankly, simply, explicitly, about this modern health safeguard which science has brought to women.”<sup>5</sup> Lysol’s reliance on “science” as a concept to sell feminine hygiene products was a long-standing and persuasive part of the Lysol campaign. While other advertisers did use science-based claims, Lysol routinely alluded to science as an authority to push its product. One of the long running pieces of the Lysol campaign was a series of ads that featured supposed “eminent women physicians” who were purported to give medical advice in the ads. While this advice was not in actuality scientifically based, the reliance on “science” as an

authority in the ads illustrates how Lysol used pseudo-science to appeal to women, and to the growing authority of science in U.S. society, especially in advertising.

### **Scientific Authority Through Advertising**

One of the major catalysts of the growth of consumerism was the movement toward a knowledge-based economy that relied on the expertise of scientific authority, as well as the falling rates of religious adherence and the social dislocation many factory workers faced as they moved from rural locations to urban factory towns.<sup>6</sup> Recently relocated citizens often found themselves in areas of crowded, fetid squalor in their new urban locations. They encountered diseases and social issues previously unseen, including widespread venereal disease and significantly unhygienic living conditions.<sup>7</sup> These conditions caused early death for many, especially children and infants, and as the growing social progressive movement took hold at the turn of the century, many turned to “scientific experts” to alleviate these conditions at home and in society. Individual middle class women were admonished to take care of their homes and children in modern, scientific ways by a growing industry of women, called domestic advisors, who made their living advising other women how to keep their homes through “scientific” methods. The work of Christine Frederick has been particularly documented as part of the household efficiency and home economics movements.<sup>8</sup> The development and institution of home economics classes for women helped to establish domesticity as a science and give authority to the women who helped develop curriculum in subjects such as sanitation, nutrition and budgeting. Sarah Leavitt explains, “Advisors used the word ‘science’ to bring a secular authority to their texts and to their vision of the ideal home.”<sup>9</sup> This rise of the “science” of the home also coincided with a growing establishment of science and technology in American



society. Following World War I, many Americans adapted to and adopted scientific and technological advancements in the home and the workplace. One particularly important contribution to the technological advancements of the U.S. home was the invention of radio, which replaced the phonograph. For many consumers the radio was the first electrical device in their home.<sup>10</sup> The growing movement to bring electricity to U.S. homes also opened the doors to household appliances and other technological advancements, but also mandated a change in education for U.S. workers who wished to remain relevant in a more technologically advanced work force. The rise of educational standards elevated scientific discourse to a level previously unseen in the West, especially among the wealthy, educated classes who had the privilege to attend universities. While science existed in some form as early as ancient Greek civilization, science education was traditionally beyond the purview of average citizen. This was changing, however, as technological and scientific advancements became more available to the general public following World War I. The push to revolutionize the American home, and the American wife/mother as consumer, colluded with rising life expectancies and life-saving medical breakthroughs that radically changed how the U.S. viewed science and technology. This change in societal views influenced both science and medicine. The authority granted to science by the public was not missed by advertisers who tapped into the growing zeitgeist of the U.S. public's fascination with science and technology to sell any number of products, including Lysol. The trend in the West away from the domination of religious doctrine as scientific inquiry took hold has been well-documented by scholars. Science came to pervade all areas of U.S. life, including consumer behavior and the home life of average American residents. Many American citizens also saw the rise of consumerism as intrinsic to American prosperity and the American way of

life. The “American Way of Life” included the ideal that Americans could consume their way to better lives through science and technology. Regina Lee Blaszczyk explains,

The “American Way of Life” [was] a blueprint for economic rejuvenation and growth. This set of ideas, promulgated in print and radio advertising, redefined the American dream around the triad of corporate progress, individual freedom and mass consumption. It held that modern materialism – an endless flow of cars and kitchen gadgets, coffee and toothpaste- was the birthright of every citizen... This set of ideas was built on the Victorian notion of technological progress, promoting the concept of Modern business as *the* rightful architect of prosperity.<sup>11</sup>

The rise of science and technology pervaded U.S. lives and influenced American society on many levels, including advertising but the rise of science, and particularly medical, authority was not without struggle.

### **The Struggle for Physician Legitimacy**

“Science” as a modern concept has existed since the beginning of the enlightenment period. Prior to the early seventeenth century, science was widely regarded as a hobby, not a subject worthy of rigorous study. Scientific study was regarded by many as inferior to the real scholarly work of the educated classes, especially in the wealthier echelons of society. Science was not formally taught in educational settings; instead it was taken up by those outside the bounds of traditional elite education. In fact, the study of science was considered so frivolous that women of the leisure class in Britain were often encouraged to engage in scientific inquiry as a hobby to keep themselves busy. Patricia Phillips describes the inferior status of science in her work about the history of women and science in Britain:

Yet, while many gentlemen, members of the privileged elite, repudiated science as too contemptible and too trivial to warrant their own attention, some thought these very demerits made it unobjectionable as a study for their ladies. The operations of the laboratory, after all, were not dissimilar to those of the kitchen, and scrutinizing lower forms of life through a microscope was more womanly than vain attempts to master the complexities of Latin and Greek. In due course, other qualities, all appropriate to the

improvement of the female sex, were attributed to the study of science: that it induced reverence and modesty; that it encouraged domesticity and curtailed flightiness; that it offered a harmless hobby, a curative for depression and corrective to the evils rife in society.<sup>12</sup>

The development of science as a valued educational discipline didn't begin in earnest until the nineteenth century, when the field was taken more seriously as a male dominated discipline backed by the institutional clout of large universities and medical institutions. Given the history of education in the West, it is hardly surprising that science became a valued field only after it was legitimized by institutions, with white men as the primary stakeholders. Medicine shares a similar trajectory to the overarching development of science education.

Historically, medicine was primarily the domain of women and domestic life. First practiced by women as “healing,” medicine fought the perception that it was the domain of women and folk knowledge through institutions and the invocation of economic markets.

Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English trace the transfer of power in medicine:

The conflict between women's traditional wisdom and male expertise centered on the right to heal. For all but the very rich, healing had traditionally been the prerogative of women. The art of healing was linked to tasks and the spirit of motherhood; it combined wisdom and nurturance, tenderness and skill. All but the most privileged women were expected to be at least literate in the language of herbs and healing techniques; the most learned women travelled widely to share their skills. The women who distinguished themselves as healers were not only midwives caring for other women, but “general practitioners,” herbalists, counselors serving men and women alike.<sup>13</sup>

The shift from women's primary role as healers to a male-dominated profession was marked by witch hunts in Europe, as women were demonized for their medical knowledge and medicine was established as an elite and profitable profession for men. However, while the gendered norms of medicine were changing, the avenues of knowledge were changing as well. The establishment of medical education, “an elaborate system of specialized knowledge, technical procedures, and rules of behavior,” did not come to fruition until the twentieth century, and only

after numerous bids for professionalization on the part of practitioners who sought the institutional clout licensure confers.<sup>14</sup> Licensure itself, though, could not erase the poor outcomes many who sought medical care in the early twentieth century experienced. Due the cost of medical treatment into the twentieth century (and beyond) physicians were often only seen once a disease had progressed quite far, and were only able to provide limited palliative care to patients. Further, the painful procedures that many patients endured at hospitals (including mercury treatment for Syphilis and blood-letting with often dire outcomes) had given previous generations a dim view of medical science. Many turned to patent medicines in lieu of seeking medical care, a situation that further imperiled the average citizen. This highly volatile medical situation came to the U.S. in the colonial period as settlers arrived with European medicine standards and practices, but it was harder for American physicians to perpetuate European standards without the backing of governmental and institutional authority: “University trained physicians did not emigrate to the colonies, and domestic medical education- or higher education of any kind- caught on only slowly.”<sup>15</sup> Instead American doctors had to petition the developing U.S. legislature many times to ensure licensure and work to eradicate those without formal medical training from their ranks. Paul Starr has named this legislative and economic process for medical professionals professional sovereignty, in which the medical community actively regulated and set standards for those entering the field: “A profession, sociologists have suggested, is an occupation that regulates itself through systematic, required training and collegial discipline; that has a base in technical, specialized knowledge; that has a service rather than a profit orientation, enshrined in its code of ethics.”<sup>16</sup> Physicians were not only seeking licensure, however. The policy bodies that represented physicians also sought economic and legislative power. Historians have come to call this phenomena physician exceptionalism, which

directly speaks to the power which the American Medical Association and other medicine-related policy advocates sought for the profession. The push for physician exceptionalism has resulted in one of the most prestigious and powerful occupations in the U.S. Nancy Tomes's history of the development of medicine in the U.S. explains that medical exceptionalism was result of certain economic and political successes on the part of physicians:

Historians of medicine have long recognized that the decades from 1880-1930 constituted an economic and cultural watershed for the American medical profession. Earlier, "regular" physicians competed not only against each other but also against a variety of alternative healers in a largely unregulated medical marketplace...historians of medicine sometimes refer to the period that followed, roughly from the 1920s through the 1960s as the "golden age" of American medicine, due to rising physician incomes and respectability and organized medicine's strength as a political lobby.<sup>17</sup>

Paul Starr explains that the profession of medicine changed radically from 1850-1930 as physicians employed greater social distance from their patients, engaged in increasingly technical surgical methods, and closed ranks as the medical community learned to work together instead of as solo practitioners: "The medical profession has had an especially persuasive claim to authority. Unlike the law and the clergy, it enjoys close bonds with modern science, and at least for the last century, scientific knowledge has held a privileged status in the hierarchy of belief."<sup>18</sup> The authority that medicine invokes today required a long period of intentional and ruthless public relations strategies, as well as educational and legislative manipulation to achieve the perception of medicine as a noble science and profession.

One of the most influential steps that medicine took was to work against patent medicines and to work through public sources and with muckrakers to increase consumer confidence in medical practice. The gains of the Progressive Era gave the American people more confidence in the medical professions due to advances in bacteriology and public hygiene. Growing understanding of bacteriology allowed significant advances in water treatment and filtration,

food production and storage, and especially regulation of the milk supply, which resulted in lower infant mortality.<sup>19</sup> These advances increased public confidence in medical science and education, and in turn gave the profession of medicine additional prestige and status. John Burnham describes, “By and large, in the wake of medical, and particularly surgical, successes, publicity about the profession was favorable, and leaders of the American medical profession succeeded by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in their campaign to persuade the public to want and expect uniformly well-trained, well-paid physicians who themselves set the standards of practice.”<sup>20</sup> Behind the scenes of all the advancements of the medical profession was a growing legislative body developed by the medical community to protect its interests. The development of the American Medical Association (AMA) in 1847 was one of the important steps toward medical legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> It marked the growing “professionalization” of medicine; the AMA continues to be an organization that advocates for the medical community. As Paul Starr explains, the U.S. has a different relationship with physicians than other parts of the world: “Hardly anywhere have doctors been as successful as American physicians in resisting national insurance and maintaining a predominately private and voluntary financing system. The growth of science, while critically important in the development of professionalism, does not assure physicians broad cultural authority, economic power, or political influence, as they have achieved in the United States.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, the move to professionalize medicine and to valorize science has been so significant in the U.S. that medicine and science were both invoked by advertisers as a cultural authority that could be reliably deployed in advertising without extensive explanation of health claims. While patent medicine makers and over the counter remedies had once held the public in their advertising thrall, the emergence of scientific authority through the channels of medicine and physicians became a powerful tool to push products in the hands of advertisers.

## Science Advertising

As medicine advanced in effectiveness, it also increased in cost. Nancy Tomes explains, “For many Americans, the new medicine and surgery represented a luxury good; that is it was a set of services affordable only by families in the top third of income levels.”<sup>23</sup> Adding to the luxury image of medicine was the development of “white palaces” - hospitals that featured the newest surgical technologies and functioned as a marketplace for medical services only available to the privileged, such as pain-relieving drugs administered during childbirth in hospitals. This privileged position was known and acknowledged by advertisers who traded on the luxury status of hospitals and cutting edge medical care, as well as the authority that science could confer on products sometimes only marginally related to medicine or science. Rima Apple’s history of the sciencification of motherhood also points to a growing involvement with science through the medium of advertising as way to push mothers to consume more products in the name of “protecting” their children and families.<sup>24</sup> While some of these public health campaigns did have positive consequences for families who sought the advice of physicians and public health officials, especially in terms of infant mortality and childhood diseases, it was often difficult for the average citizen to decipher advertising fact from fiction. Science advertising became so prevalent, according to Treffie Cox, J.S. McCollum and Ralph Watkins, that researchers at the University of Missouri called for a formal education curriculum to aid high school students in parsing the claims of ads that used scientific language and concepts to sell goods.<sup>25</sup> According to Nancy Tomes, the United States entered a period of health fads, which extended to popular texts written specifically for pushing “health” products that advertisers invented health reasons for using. Tomes notes, “In an increasingly robust consumer culture, Americans of all classes were

exposed to a rising tide of commercial messages designed to create a perpetual state of dissatisfaction with their current health status and longing for a new and improved self.”<sup>26</sup> The push for additional health and hygiene items was not an isolated occurrence; many products that had only vague and dubious claims to any “health” improvements developed ad campaigns that attempted to tie their product directly to health or medicine. One such ad campaign was the Lysol douche campaign, which attempted to exploit Lysol’s status as a hospital product used to clean surgical suites and floors, to influence a transition of the product to home use, for hygiene and cleaning purposes as well as birth control.

### **Lysol Science Advertisements**

Bacteriologists introduced many Americans to previously unknown information about food preparation, communicable diseases, and sanitation norms that had wide-reaching and often life-saving consequences. Education about these growing standards came from the home economics and domestic education movements, as well as popular publications aimed at middle-class women that promoted the ideals of scientific motherhood. Given the success of many of these campaigns, and the vigor with which many U.S. homes and housewives incorporated these standards, it is unsurprising that manufacturers and advertisers took up the mantle of public health to sell their products. Nancy Tomes elucidates,

From the 1880s onward, entrepreneurs and manufacturers of all sorts realized that the fear of the microbe could be effectively exploited to sell a wealth of goods and services...the range of aids to combat the microbe expanded dramatically between 1895 and 1915 to include everything from antiseptic floor coverings to sanitary dish drainers and fly traps. Germ-conscious advertising campaigns became an educational force, yet they did not represent a simple extension of the work of antituberculois crusaders or the domestic scientists. For all their invocations of laboratory authority to sell their products, manufacturers and advertisers displayed no deep allegiance to the scruples of science.<sup>27</sup>



Given the ubiquitousness of advertisers' appeals to public health concerns for profit, Lysol was not the only company to benefit from pseudo-scientific advertising. Instead of employing a campaign that explicitly used what Roland Marchand has named "scare campaigns" to sell the douche, Lysol chose to use a pseudo-scientific narrative approach that assured women that Lysol could provide a "simple, discrete" solution for the problem of birth or disease control.<sup>28</sup> Lysol promoted its product through three categories of pseudo-science appeals. The first is explicit appeals to physician authority. Many of the ads directly mention physicians as providing a source of information that Lysol can then provide to the consumer, or testifying as to the use of the product as part of their specialized scientific knowledge. These ads implore the consumer to view the advice offered in the ads as though it was from reputable sources, even when the source is not named. In her work on Lysol ads directed at mothers in Canada for antiseptic house cleaning during the interwar period, Kristin Hall elaborates on Lysol's overall strategy to be seen as disseminating "expert" advice to consumers: "The ad does not specify which health authorities are meant, no doubt because there is no evidence that any particular authority advocated use of Lysol, but mothers who were accustomed to and welcomed expert advice would have probably responded positively to this claim."<sup>29</sup> The authority of physicians would have perhaps been compelling for women who believed that the information contained in the ads was scientifically accurate or who had no alternative options. The second strategy that Lysol employed was to conspicuously align Lysol with the aims of bacteriologists and the anti-germ sanitation movements. The ad campaign attempted to use specific language that would have been recognizable to consumers because of public health movements. The rhetoric of public health was promoted by popular publications that ran copious articles about the dangers of under-sanitation and other health related concerns. Given the tangential connection of communicable

disease in their ads, it is likely that some women thought of other communicable diseases that Lysol might help with as well. Lysol used this language to align itself with the bacteriologist movement and also perhaps as a way to distract some audiences (censors) from the intended purpose of the Lysol douche. Finally, Lysol's ads strove to produce rhetorical appeals that situated Lysol as a disseminator of scarce, but desirable scientific information. The Lysol campaign worked hard to situate itself as an "expert" in the field of feminine hygiene with the aim of gaining the trust of women who wished to avoid pregnancy or disease.

### *Appeals to Physician Authority*

One of the strategies that the Lysol ads used was to present information as though it were from a physician and/or endorsed by the medical community. As an ad from June 1924 proclaims, Lysol's facts are "backed by the authority of leading physicians."<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the ad copy often used specific titles of physicians that may have been impressive to populations who had little medical knowledge. Given the rise of physician prominence in this time period, some readers may have been impressed by technical language in the ads, such as an ad from *Hearst's* in June 1924, which cited a nameless "Chief gynecologist of a large New York hospital" as proof of Lysol's legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> Other ads relied directly on the claim of physician endorsement. The June 1929 issue of *Hearst's* included an ad which directed women to send away for a free "booklet called 'The Scientific Side of Health and Youth.' It was written by a woman physician. It gives professional advice and explicit rules. It answers the questions you would like to ask her in person."<sup>32</sup> By relying on the authority of alleged physicians, Lysol was able to position itself as an arbiter of information and to admonish women not to seek counsel from non-physicians, or from other companies that were offering feminine hygiene products.

This allowed the company to take the place of the advice giver, especially in a time when it was not possible, economical, or comfortable, for most women to seek such information from their actual physicians or pharmacists. An ad from *McCall's* that appeared in June of 1929 warned women against other advice, because Lysol's free health booklet "contains *professional* advice, not false claims and misleading directions."<sup>33</sup> Additionally, an ad from June 1929 explicitly warned women from seeking advice from non-physicians by admonishing women that "feminine hygiene incorrectly practiced may lead to serious consequences."<sup>34</sup> The trouble with the purported professional advice for women, though, was that it was not necessarily possible for individual women to know if the advice given was medically sound. Access to physicians was limited to those with resources, and even those who could afford to see a physician for birth control questions may not have received many answers to their questions. Often physicians were not adequately trained in contraceptives or family limitation and could provide little information about the topic. Additionally, physicians could face criminal charges if they did divulge information about birth control. This led women to seek out their own information, and often the information that they had access to came from advertisers and women's magazines. Lysol ads also admonished women from "Tak[ing] anybody's word...a neighbor's, an afternoon bridge partner's...for the correct technique of personal antisepsis, for the dependability of a germicide. And yet this subject concerns so *intimately* their health, their looks, the precious happiness of married life!"<sup>35</sup> The idea that women shouldn't trust their neighbors or anyone besides Lysol's supposed physician testimony for advice about birth control is obviously self-serving, but it also speaks to the role that Lysol wished to have in the lives of women, as both a confidant and a "scientific" authority.

Additionally, as we saw in the last chapter, the ads promoted the authority of Lysol's physicians to assume more than just a scientific role in the ads, but also to dispense "marriage advice" from women physicians who supposedly had high levels of education and experience counselling patients. This allowed Lysol to position the "physician" as both an authority that "had confidence" in Lysol, but also to disseminate information about woman's personal lives, bodies and marriages in a way that was helpful as opposed to intrusive. As an ad from October 1934 in *Hearst's* demonstrates, Lysol was angling to not just provide scientific information, but rather to give women a simple solution to their potential marital woes as well. The headline of the ad reads, "Don't take chances with marriage hygiene, My Dear, 'Lysol' is safe."<sup>36</sup> The photo accompanying the ad shows an unflappable, but concerned-looking woman in a dark dress with a short, efficient-looking hairstyle seated at a desk with pen in hand. She looks reservedly at a woman, across the desk (obviously the patient) who has her hand over her face in obvious distress. The copy goes on to explain that, "Scores of women come to me every year with their married happiness tottering, all because they are positively ill from fear. In nine cases out of ten the way out is marriage hygiene. My advice is two short words 'use Lysol'... When it comes to a crisis-involving life itself- the ablest physicians always turn to Lysol. It's the one method I have absolute confidence in."<sup>37</sup> Lehn and Fink utilize the authority of physicians to not only create explicit ties to the medical world and the scientific revolution, but also to position Lysol as having specific authority itself through the testimony of physicians. The physician in the ads functions as a cipher to those who are seeking birth control to trust Lysol as an authority based on scientific testimony, but also to speak authoritatively to those who do not yet need birth control as they contemplate their potential married lives.

In fact, Lehn and Fink was not satisfied with merely using the term “physician” in its ads. Lysol also produced a series of advertisements which featured the “testimony” of supposed female physicians and gynecologists, touting the Lysol douche as a premiere form of feminine hygiene. These messages, which gave the illusion of a scientific perspective, may have given women confidence that they were purchasing a contraceptive device that was technologically advanced.<sup>38</sup> However, these “physicians” were more than likely entirely fictional and invented for the purposes of the Lysol douche ad campaign.<sup>39</sup>

NUMBER FIVE IN A SERIES OF FRANK TALKS BY LEADING WOMEN PHYSICIANS

## “If I could tell the young bride but one thing

●

**“IT WOULD BE THIS:**

Practice feminine antiseptics faithfully and intelligently . . . with a safe and reliable antiseptic.

“This, to my mind, should be the first health commandment to the young bride.

“Health is the basis of all happiness in life . . . and particularly marital life. To lose the eager enthusiasm of girlhood shortly after marriage, to grow listless, despondent and irritable under the stern trials and demands of home-making is not only a tragedy to a wife but a doleful catastrophe to her husband.

“Yet such is the frequent penalty of neglected marriage hygiene. Those poignant fears and apprehensions, common to women, often grow into serious mental and physical disturbances . . . through slovenly inattention to feminine daintiness.

“For feminine health and mental serenity, “Lysol” disinfectant has been advocated by the physicians of Europe for nearly half a century. “Lysol” is almost universally used by our obstetricians for the delicate ministrations of childbirth. It is safe, gentle, efficient. It is not merely antiseptic. It is germicidal. Safeguarding the frail or overtired wife from taxations upon her health which all too often she is not physically qualified to meet.”

(Signed)

DR. NELLY STERN



Photographed by Man Ray in Franzensbad

Dr. Nelly Stern, Awarded her medical degree at the University of Vienna, considered leading gynecologist at the world famous women's spa of Franzensbad in Czechoslovakia. Author of a book entitled “Hygiene und Diätetik der Frau” (Woman's Hygiene and Dietetics).

Figure 5.2. “If I could tell the young bride but one thing” *McCall's*, November 1932

In the ad from September 1932 (fig 5.2), the woman in the photograph is reported to be “Dr. Nelly Stern, Awarded her medical degree at the University of Vienna; considered leading gynecologist at the world famous women’s spa of Franzensbad in Czechoslovakia. Author of a book entitled “Hygiene und Diätetik der Frau.”<sup>40</sup> In fact, *Hygiene und Diätetik der Frau* does exist, but it was authored by Dr. Hugo Sellheim in 1926 and the name Nelly Stern does not

appear anywhere as an author of the work.<sup>41</sup> The book is written in German, however, and it seems very unlikely that most U.S. women would have had any way to know that Dr. Nelly Stern was merely an invention of the Lysol advertising team. Lysol did not just depend on one doctor in its ads, however, choosing instead to feature a series of physicians giving “Frank Talks.” Other “physicians” were purported to be from other parts of Europe, but especially from Paris. An ad from *McCall’s* in November 1923 featured a “Mademoiselle Docteur Madelaine Lion” supposedly a “widely recognized gynecologist of Paris. Head of the Laboratories Ducatte.”<sup>42</sup> Additionally, in May 1933, another leading Parisian gynecologist turned up in a Lysol ad in *McCall’s*: “Doctor M. Dousdebès of Paris, distinguished French gynecologist.”<sup>43</sup> *Hearst’s* featured an ad in October 1934 in which Lysol was supposedly endorsed by “Dr. Clotilde Delaunay, leading gynecologist of Paris.”<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, American women had no way to know that this information was not actually coming from a reputable physician. As I noted in chapter 4, the potential appeal of a European doctor for some populations also cannot be understated, as Margaret Sanger was known in certain circles to be importing European forms of birth control that were unavailable in the U.S. Lysol was also relying on a familiar trope in U.S., advertising that presented Europe as both more culturally advanced and more libertine in social standards. Wealthy women who had traveled abroad may have been aware that the U.S. was one of the first countries to have women physicians, but many middle class women may not have been aware of the current state of European medical education.

This aggressive form of advertising allowed women to bypass an actual conversation with their doctor, but still be “assured” that the product they were using was recommended by one. This tactic was helpful in informing women that they needed to be careful about what types of feminine hygiene products for their own safety, and that the best product to use was the one

that had been endorsed by “leading” physicians, which of course was the Lysol douche. These “physicians” were fictional, created by the company to sell product, not real doctors qualified to provide actual advice. As the market became flooded with competing products, Lehn and Fink set out to make sure that their product was the one affiliated with the medical profession, even if only in a fictional way. Medical authority was not only invested in physicians, but also in the language of science. Particularly the field of bacteriology had seen significant advances, and had helped to grow the authority of medicine in the U.S. public.

### *Alignment with Bacteriology*

In a July 1929 ad that appeared in *McCall's* magazine, the ad copy calls for women to be “fastidiously groomed” in a bid to have “meticulous cleanliness.”<sup>45</sup> The focus on cleanliness is not by chance in these ads. It echoes the language of health campaigns that promoted the recent findings of the field of bacteriology. Knowledge of bacteria and microorganisms was developing rapidly in this time period, and this knowledge gave public health advocates information that changed the standards of hygiene in the U.S. The “sanitary science,” which had become popularized with the progressive movement, used the language of cleanliness to exhort women to change their housekeeping practices to keep their families safe from atmospheric conditions in which diseases were thought to develop. While sanitary science was eventually replaced by germ theory, the solutions promoted for women in the home were similar: changes in cleaning, cooking, and child care to prevent the spread of infectious disease.<sup>46</sup> Society rapidly went from having no qualms about bed sharing with (potentially infectious) strangers at hotels and boarding houses to concerns about antiseptic properties of cleaners that would protect families from typhoid fever or cholera. The language used by these movements indicated that women needed

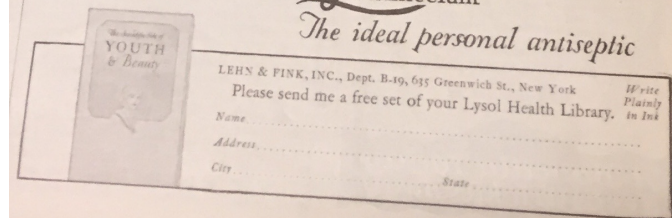


to take more care with their housekeeping to protect their families, and this language was echoed by Lysol ads that called for women to be “fastidious,” “meticulously clean,” and “immaculate” to protect themselves from disease. These ads used the language of public health reformers to attempt to communicate to consumers that Lysol was part of the solution to modern hygienic concerns. However, while Lysol did run a concurrent ad campaign as a cleaning product for the home, the Lysol douche ads focused on women’s internal cleanliness. Hygiene concerns around bathing, dentistry, and body odor abounded in ads for other products that pursued the market share of rapidly expanding hygiene products. The Lysol douche took a different approach and instead told women that they needed internal cleanliness. Ads that promoted Lysol in this way worked to change how women viewed their bodies and what a “clean” body consisted of: “True cleanliness comes only through attention to the little details of the toilette often neglected,” one ad extorted.<sup>47</sup> Lysol argued that women must change their own hygiene practices to match the practices of their housekeeping. Women must pay careful attention to areas that had been neglected in order to be truly clean in their homes and in their bodies. This means that no longer is a body which has recently bathed with soap and used deodorant the standard of cleanliness; women must be internally clean as well. This movement toward “cleanliness” reflected the various and sundry other hygiene products that were developed and marketed to the American public during this time period. However, Lysol was not merely advocating for a cleaner vagina, but rather indicating that a supposedly cleaner vagina would prevent pregnancy from occurring. This move to associate Lysol with the language of medicine and bacteriology had more than one intended interpretation for women who could read between the lines of the ads.

In July 1925, an ad in *Hearst’s Cosmopolitan* introduced the idea of women’s hygiene with a description that invokes science and bacteriology in the same paragraph: “One of the

most important health practices of modern science is Feminine Hygiene. It protects you from disease, keeps your youth and peace of mind. Every physician now knows how valuable this routine is for the prevention of infection. And more and more every day, women are realizing, and spreading to their sisters the significance of this great protective measure.”<sup>48</sup> The move to tie Lysol to prevention of “internal infections” is further explicated in the ad by the assurance that “Lysol, although it is three times stronger than carbolic acid, is so blended that in proper proportion it is more soothing and lubricating- less irritating than fine toilet soap.”<sup>49</sup> The concern for the “strength” of the product seems of particular notice given the area to which the product is to be applied, considering that carbolic acid might not be a product that one would take internally. However, given the “sanitary” rhetoric of cleanliness, strong cleansers may have been preferred as a caution against infectious diseases. In the preventive measures of sanitary science bleach, lye, and other caustic cleansers would have been familiar to those who had received educations in the domestic sciences, so the naming of Lysol as an “internal” cleanser would perhaps have been compelling for women who wished to maintain what they believed to be sanitary conditions for their own bodies. Additionally, the copy of the ad, visible below (Fig 5.3), goes one step further in promising “health precautions,” “banish[ing] diseases,” and “wholesome, healthful wives and mothers” for those who used Lysol. Given the authority of the scientific housekeeping movement among women who believed that they needed to adopt “modern” standards for cleaning to protect their families and children, the move by Lysol to convince women that they also needed to be protected from “insidious infection” is not a far leap. Lysol’s claim to hospital use also contributes to the idea that Lysol can be used for infections, both in the hospital and at home. Inserting the fear of “infection” as a precursor to purchase is not the only rhetorical maneuver in these ads, however.

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*Figure 5.3. “Knowledge keeps the modern woman vibrant and healthful” Hearst’s International-Cosmopolitan, July 1925*

In an ad from *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* from October 1925, Lysol introduces the idea of germs to their rhetorical resources: "Physicians recommend it because it is absolutely trustworthy- 100% effective as a destroyer of germs."<sup>50</sup> This seems rhetorically similar to other sanitary science types of concerns, but this statement provides a polysemous reading for those who are savvy. The addition of the term "daintiness" in the headline of the ad lets the reader know that the "germs" referenced are not germ theory related, but instead a euphemistic term for sperm. The use of "dainty" was a polite way for advertisers to indicate that someone was not pregnant. In the chapter on marriage, I delve into this issue in more depth, but suffice to say that many women of the day would have been able to read between the lines of the ad to the claim that Lysol kills semen and therefore would prevent pregnancy. This rhetorical maneuver allowed Lysol to stay on the right side of censors, and had the added benefit of a sales pitch for those who read the ad straight. For the intended population, the "100% effectiveness" claim would have been related to the avoidance of pregnancy, not an infection. But for those women who were not savvy to this particular reading, they may have just assumed Lysol was protection against communicable disease, and perhaps provided a prophylactic effect against infections including sexual transmitted diseases. This language is echoed in other ads of the same time period that point to germs as a euphemism. An ad from June 1924, which also appeared in *Hearst's*, promised that "germicidal strength is absolutely dependable" and that Lysol has "germ killing power."<sup>51</sup> The language of dependability and the issue of "periodic fears" that require "constant attention" connotes that Lysol was doing more than just admonishing women to add a product to their toilette. Instead, it seems very clear that these "fears" applied very directly to the concern of pregnancy and the loss of "daintiness." This language allowed Lysol to make claims that both tied Lysol to the authority of the rapidly developing and trusted field of medicine, while still

staying out of the sights of censors who may have asked uncomfortable questions about the intended use of the Lysol douche. The terms “fastidious,” “immaculate,” “dependable,” and “dainty” allow the reader to approach the meaning of the ads from multiple angles.

### *Lysol as Knowledge Keeper*

Lysol did not just position itself as adjacent to the medical community, however; Lehn and Fink’s advertising campaigns situated Lysol’s ads and “health library” as providing access to scarce information. Given the lack of information available to most women in this time period about their own bodies and about reproduction and contraception, women had few places to turn for adequate and accurate information. This lack created a space for companies with no medical expertise to claim expert knowledge about scientific processes. Lysol’s offer to send a “booklet that explains it all” for no charge in a discrete wrapper for anyone who requested one may have been one of the few resources that some women had access to. Therefore, Lysol was able to make the claim that it was providing information for women that they both need and want. According to Lysol, “knowledge keeps the modern women vibrant and healthful.”<sup>52</sup> This provided a unique opportunity for Lysol to function as a gatekeeper of so-called scientific information. Claims that Lysol makes to scientific authority are supported by the fiction of physician support in the ads. The “frank talks from eminent women physicians” series is an example of how Lysol positioned itself as having access to medical information that women want. In an ad that appeared in *McCall’s* in May 1933 (fig. 5.4), Lysol provides what was supposed to be clinical information from a supposed female physician: “The masks that women wear to all the world are dropped – when they enter a physician’s inner office. Often we play the role of confessor, as well as doctor. I do not claim the wisdom of a lawyer or Domestic Relations

judge, but this much I do know: Fewer marriages would flounder around in a state of misunderstanding and unhappiness if more wives knew and practiced regular marriage hygiene.”<sup>53</sup> Given the cost of a physician visit, most woman reading the ad likely never visited the “inner office” of a physician. The accompanying photograph of a woman, supposedly credited to Man Ray, shows a no-nonsense expression and sensible short hair. The woman is sitting at a desk with a glass vessel that is potentially some kind of lab equipment along with a graduated cylinder used for measuring liquids in a lab. She’s holding a pen and taking notes. The ad copy goes on to state that Doctor M. Dousdebès recommends the “Lysol method” as way to preserve marriages. The ad copy is similar to other Lysol ads, in that it states the germicidal power of Lysol and the “refreshing” effect on delicate membranes. The advantages of Lysol are laid out carefully by the text. Additionally, though, Lysol invites the reader to send away for information that only it can provide:

Have you a young married daughter or friend who should know these facts? For your own guidance, as well as for the enlightenment of any girl or woman who is near and dear to you. May we send you a copy of our interesting booklet –  
 “Marriage happiness-the important part it plays in an ideal marriage”?  
 Written by three distinguished women physicians, it handles the vital subject with rare delicacy and charm. Merely mail the coupon, and your copy will be sent, postpaid, in plain wrapper.<sup>54</sup>

Notice that the ad doesn’t encourage women to write to Paris for advice, nor does the ad copy encourage women to see their physicians. Instead, Lysol is put in the position of having the authority to mail out booklets to women seeking information on the “vital subject.” Lysol uses its adjacent positioning to the medical field, even if it is a fiction, to make claims about its ability to give out desired information. The importance of information to populations who have no other way to access it is hard to imagine in the Western world today when unlimited information is at the ready on the Internet. But the lack of information available to



NUMBER NINE IN A SERIES OF FRANK TALKS BY EMINENT WOMEN PHYSICIANS 95

## "The most frequent eternal triangle A HUSBAND... A WIFE and her FEARS"

THE masks that women wear to all the world are dropped—when they enter a physician's inner office. Often we play the role of confessor, as well as doctor.

"I do not claim the wisdom of a lawyer or Domestic Relations judge, but this much I do know:

"Fewer marriages would flounder around in a state of misunderstanding and unhappiness if more wives knew and practiced regular marriage hygiene.

"Without it, some minor physical irregularity plants in a woman's mind the fear of a major crisis. Let so devastating a fear recur again and again, and the most charming and gracious wife turns into a nerve-ridden, irritable travesty of herself. Bewildering, to say the least, to even the kindest of husbands. Fatal, inevitably, to the beauty of the marriage relation.

"It all sounds very dreadful, doesn't it? But it needn't happen. The proper technique of marriage hygiene, faithfully followed, replaces fear with peace of mind. Makes what seems a grave problem no problem at all.

"What is the proper technique? To my practice I recommend the "Lysol" method. I know that "Lysol" destroys germs in the presence of organic matter, not just on a glass slide. I know that it has high penetrating power, reaching into every fold and crevice. And I further know that with all its power, it is very gentle. Soothing and healing enough, for example, to be used in childbirth cases. You see there is no free caustic alkali, such as you find in chlorine compounds, to inflame tender feminine tissue.

"Lysol" makes the whole ritual of feminine hygiene refreshing and agreeable. It contributes to a woman's sense of fastidiousness, as well as to her freedom from fear. It's a dainty and cleanly habit... and a wise one, if health and harmony are to dwell with her throughout her married life."

(Signed)  
DR. M. DOUSDEBÈS



Photographed by Man Ray in Paris

● Doctor M. Dousdebès of Paris, distinguished French gynecologist. Former chief assistant of the obstetrical and gynecological department of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris, former chief assistant of Clinic Tarnier; interne at Hôpital de la Pitié de Paris, during the war.

Have you a young married daughter or friend who should know these facts?

For your own guidance, as well as for the enlightenment of any girl or woman who is near and dear to you... may we send you a copy of our interesting booklet—



**Lysol**  
Disinfectant

"Marriage Hygiene"—The important part it plays in the ideal marriage? Written by three distinguished women physicians, it handles the vital subject of marriage hygiene with rare delicacy and charm. Merely mail the coupon, and your copy will be sent, postpaid, in plain wrapper.

LEHN & FINK, Inc., Bloomfield, N. J. Dept. LH-7  
Sole Distributors of "Lysol" disinfectant

Please send me free, postpaid, a copy of your new booklet, "Marriage Hygiene," with articles by three internationally famous women physicians.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Street \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_

© Lehn & Fink, Inc. 1933

Figure 5.4. "The most frequent eternal triangle" *McCall's*, May 1933

women at this time may have given Lysol an advantage in selling its product and being seen as a trusted source of birth control. By using the terminology and “testimony” of the medical field, Lehn and Fink were able to carve out a sizable portion of the feminine hygiene market. As *Fortune* stated in 1938, by the late 1930s the Lysol douche was the best-selling female contraceptive in the country in a rapidly growing market.<sup>55</sup> Lysol’s ads also set out to separate themselves from other advertisers as more credible through their alliances with both physician authority and the field of bacteriology and “sanitary science.” Additionally, Lysol was successful in convincing women that “it is not safe to accept the counsels of the tea table” and working to establish itself as the source for credible information about birth control.<sup>56</sup> By convincing women that their friends were not experts on the subject, but that advertisers and fictional physicians were, Lehn and Fink was able to create a situation in which the advertisers were able to establish a rhetorical monopoly for women who were too embarrassed to discuss feminine hygiene with friends or family, but also for women who sought a “medical” opinion without the embarrassment of a doctor’s visit. What is interesting about this strategy is that advertisers were able to create a rhetorical strategy to sell something that women felt they needed, even though it was ineffective, especially in a time period in which people had less and less disposable income due to the Depression. The push for women to control their own reproductive destinies become an avenue for companies and advertisers to colonize the female body through false claims and ineffective products. The convincing argument that women could not afford not to buy birth control seemed to be powerfully persuasive to women who were looking to control their own fertility.



## **Conclusion**

The Lysol campaign relied heavily on the authority of science and medicine to convince women that its product was safe and reliable. The changes in the medical field in the U.S. and the rise of physician exceptionalism allowed advertisers to make arguments about the health uses of their products, even when the product had already recommended against by physicians. The 1912 Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry of the AMA stated the harm that could be caused by feminine hygiene products, but that did not stop advertisers from using physician appeals. The concerns of the medical community during this time period were often overpowered by the ubiquitous ads of feminine hygiene products. Consumer laws in this country did little to protect the consumer from harm. The fight for birth control was literally harmful for many women who lacked the knowledge to make educated choices. Even when consumers sued for damages, Lehn and Fink were able to avoid prosecution because of weak consumer legislation. In fact, Lysol continued to sell the douche in the face of lawsuits, and was the best-selling form of birth control in the country for a surprising length of time. Many of the strategies of the Lysol campaign are still being applied to modern birth control campaigns and pharmaceutical advertising.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> “What is your degree of cleanliness?” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, February 1926, 157.
- <sup>2</sup> “What is your degree of cleanliness?” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, February 1926, 157.
- <sup>3</sup> Patricia A. Johnson, *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen’s Advertising Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 4.
- <sup>4</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 48.
- <sup>5</sup> “What have I done?” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, August 1928, 157.
- <sup>6</sup> See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (Berkeley, University of California, 1997) for an in-depth analysis of turn of the century living conditions.
- <sup>7</sup> Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40-72.
- <sup>8</sup> See Sarah Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Greensboro, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Janice Williams Rutherford, *Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003).
- <sup>9</sup> Sarah Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Greensboro, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 41.
- <sup>10</sup> Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society, 1865-2005: From Hearth to HDTV* (New York: Wiley, 2009), 139-48.
- <sup>11</sup> Blaszczyk, *American Consumer Society*, 133.
- <sup>12</sup> Patricia Phillips, *The Scientific Lady: A Social History of Women’s Scientific Interests, 1520-1918* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990), x.
- <sup>13</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Dierdre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Experts’ Advice to Women* (Garden City, NY: Anchor City Press, 1978), 30.
- <sup>14</sup> Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Ehrenreich and English, *For Her Own Good*, 35.
- <sup>16</sup> Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, 15.
- <sup>17</sup> Nancy Tomes, “Merchants of Health: Medicine and Consumer Culture in the United States, 1900-1940,” *The Journal of American History*, 88.2 (September 2001): 524.
- <sup>18</sup> Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, 4.
- <sup>19</sup> Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, 135.
- <sup>20</sup> John C. Burnham, “American Medicine’s Golden Age: What happened to it?” *Science* 215 (March 1982): 1474.
- <sup>21</sup> Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 320.
- <sup>22</sup> Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine*, 6.
- <sup>23</sup> Nancy Tomes, “Medicine and Consumer Culture”, 529.
- <sup>24</sup> Rima D. Apple, *Mothers and Medicine: A Social History of Infant Feeding, 1890-1950* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

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- <sup>25</sup> Treffie Cox, J.S. McCollum, and Ralph K. Watkins, "Science Claims in Magazine Advertising," *Science Education* 22.1 (1938): 14-19.
- <sup>26</sup> Nancy Tomes, "Medicine and Consumer Culture," 531.
- <sup>27</sup> Nancy Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11.
- <sup>28</sup> For a full description of scare campaigns, see Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 102-3.
- <sup>29</sup> Kristin Hall, "Selling Lysol as a Household Disinfectant," in *Consuming Modernity: Gendered Behavior and Consumerism Before the Baby Boom*, eds. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh and Dan Malleck (Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 2013), 66.
- <sup>30</sup> Here is a booklet every women ought to read," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, June 1924, 167.
- <sup>31</sup> "Here's a booklet every women ought to read," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, June 1925, 167.
- <sup>32</sup> "The indefinable air of exquisiteness," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, July 1929, 91.
- <sup>33</sup> "Lysol disinfectant is an essential part..." *McCall's*, June 1929, 100.
- <sup>34</sup> "Lysol disinfectant is an essential part..." *McCall's*, June 1929, 100.
- <sup>35</sup> "The serene marriage...should it be jeopardized by needless fears?" *McCall's*, December 1932, 87.
- <sup>36</sup> "Don't take chances with marriage hygiene my dear," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, October 1934, 143.
- <sup>37</sup> "Don't take chances with marriage hygiene my dear," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, October 1934, 143.
- <sup>38</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 161-63.
- <sup>39</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 161-63.
- <sup>40</sup> "If I could tell the young bride but one thing," *McCalls*, September 1932, 98.
- <sup>41</sup> Hugo Sellheim, *Hygiene und Diätetik der Frau* (Munich: Verlag von J.F. Bergmann, 1926).
- <sup>42</sup> "The serene marriage...should it be jeopardized by needless fears?" *McCall's*, November 1932, 87.
- <sup>43</sup> "The most frequent eternal triangle," *McCall's*, May 1933, 85.
- <sup>44</sup> "Don't take chances with marriage hygiene my dear," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, October 1934, 143.
- <sup>45</sup> "That indefinable air of exquisiteness," *McCall's*, July 1929, 93.
- <sup>46</sup> Tomes, *The Gospel of Germs*, 32.
- <sup>47</sup> "The radiant charm of true cleanliness," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, November 1929, 215.
- <sup>48</sup> "Knowledge keeps the modern woman vibrant and healthful," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, July 1925, 189.
- <sup>49</sup> <sup>49</sup>"Knowledge keeps the modern woman vibrant and healthful," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, July 1925, 189.
- <sup>50</sup> "A women's three requisites are health, youth – daintiness," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan*, October 1925, 209.
- <sup>51</sup> "Here's a booklet every women ought to read," *Hearst's International Cosmopolitan* June 1925, 167.

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<sup>52</sup> “Knowledge keeps the modern woman vibrant and healthful,” *Hearst’s International Cosmopolitan*, July 1925, 189.

<sup>53</sup> “The most frequent eternal triangle,” *McCall’s*, May 1933, 85.

<sup>54</sup> “The most frequent eternal triangle,” *McCall’s*, May 1933, 85.

<sup>55</sup> “The Accident of Birth,” *Fortune*, February 1938, 84.

<sup>56</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 160.

## Chapter 6

### What Can We Learn from the Lysol Case?

For most Western women, douching is no longer considered a necessary or desirable practice. Current medical science has tied the douche to a confluence of negative issues for women who use it, including ectopic pregnancy<sup>1</sup>, imbalances of bacteria in the vagina that lead to infections, and general discomfort and irritation, among others.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the medical community seems to have had several internal discussions about the efficacy and necessity of douching. These conversations happened in several time periods, including the 1920s and 1960s.<sup>3</sup> However, the conversation among medical professionals about douching began long before the 1920s. In 1898, physician Frank Stahl published an article that detailed the life cycle of the medical practice of douching in the 1800s, including physicians' mixed reactions to the use of douches. Most startling, Stahl recounts that some physicians recommended douching with "1 per cent Lysol solution ... not to remove the vaginal germs, rather to remove the vaginal mucus, replacing this with a layer of disinfection fluid" during labor.<sup>4</sup> While current medical practice would not endorse this practice, the response of the medical professionals to douching in this time period does raise significant questions about how the practice of douching eventually became tied to the practice of contraception and the complicated factors that kept the douche profitable for manufacturers.

As I have explained in previous chapters, the Lysol douche was the highest grossing douche product during this time period, although there were several similar products on the market. Chapter two explained that the prevalence of the douche as a feminine hygiene product during the Comstock years in the U.S. was tied to many factors including the legal restrictions that protected businesses, not consumers, before the Wheeler-Lea Act was passed. Additionally, Comstock regulations were part of a cultural system that restricted vital information from women

about their bodies for religious and societal reasons. The passing of the Comstock Act, which was intended to drive out all forms of contraception, actually acted as a catalyst to increase the market for products that were covertly being used as birth control or, potentially as prophylactics against venereal disease. While the motivation of the Comstock Act was to squelch all forms of obscenity, the publicity from arrests and seizures of materials often did more to pique the public's interest. Women were put in a particularly precarious position by these factors and by the fact that they were assumed to be primarily responsible for the decisions relating to fertility and childbirth. These factors allowed advertisers to craft rhetorical messages that exploited the fears of women and relied on the rhetorical conventions of euphemism to convey their messages. The absence of any consumer protection laws gave manufacturers the green light to sell products that might have caused harm; concurrently, Comstock legislation required advertisers to use euphemistic means to avoid indecency statutes. This particular confluence of factors allowed advertisers and manufacturers to make a profit off the ignorance of American women. This is not to say that U.S. women were unsophisticated consumers or uneducated; instead, American manufacturing and advertising communities had a vested interest in keeping women from this knowledge. While the medical community and legislative bodies worked slowly to decide how contraceptive information should be handled, individual women were at the mercy of what information was available to them. Often that information was from advertisers of products sold under the feminine hygiene label. As Norman Hines explains, "The failure of the medical profession to accept leadership in contraceptive instruction has undoubtedly played a part in the tremendous increase in recent years in the commercial and sometimes anti-social dissemination of such advice."<sup>5</sup> Given the political and societal climate of the U.S., it is clear that women had little information to make educated decisions about contraception, forcing them to choose

between the inadequate choices advertisers presented without much information about efficacy. Norman Himes relates, “injury is being done because American women are hampered in free access to reliable medical knowledge and because practices are not always guided by competent medical advice.”<sup>6</sup>

Starting in the 1920s, advertising for feminine hygiene increasingly became a part of the American advertising landscape until the development of the pill in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Given the ability to quickly, easily and inexpensively purchase antiseptic products at the grocery or drugstore, it was perhaps inevitable that the douche would be the choice of many women who wished to limit their family size or engage in the nebulous practice of “feminine hygiene.” In any case, women in the U.S. were using douches frequently, and perhaps for different purposes. However, that is not to say that the antiseptic douche had no critics.

As I discussed in chapter 2, Rachel Lynn Palmer, a consumer activist, and Sarah K. Greenberg, an M.D., published a text in response to the proliferation of douche usage in 1936. *Facts and Frauds in Women’s Hygiene* directly addressed douche usage as harmful.<sup>8</sup> The text addresses antiseptic douching in more than one chapter, but devotes an entire chapter to the dangers of Lysol and Zonite, two of the more popular antiseptic douche products. Palmer and Greenberg warn women of the caustic nature of antiseptic douches. They cite physicians and research studies that demonstrated health facts in direct opposition to Lysol’s advertising. Including that Lysol was no longer used on vaginal tissue in hospitals during childbirth due to the damage caused and the danger of cresol, the main ingredient of Lysol, as a potentially cancer causing agent. Palmer and Greenberg build a compelling case for the abandonment of the antiseptic douche. They note, “It takes more than the word “safe” in capital letters to refute the

many cases, in medical literature, of injury and even death from Lysol.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, Lysol was quite harmful to many women who used it. Andrea Tone explains,

Lysol was a caustic poison and in more concentrated form was retailed with a prominent skull-and-crossbones icon. Ingested, it could kill; applied externally, it irritated and burned. Lehn and Fink sold it for feminine hygiene anyway, ignoring a recommendation made by the 1912 Council of Pharmacy and Chemistry of the AMA that companies not advertise to the laity ... antiseptics for application to the ...genitourinary tract. By 1922, doctors had recorded 193 Lysol poisonings, including 21 suicides, 1 homicide, and 5 deaths from uterine irrigation... As Lysol became more commercially widespread, injury and death rates grew. Coroners in New York City reported 40 suicidal and 4 accidental Lysol deaths in 1925 alone.<sup>10</sup>

While these deaths or injuries were sometimes reported in the press, it was with far less frequency than ads that praised antiseptics as safe and effective, and therefore many women continued to think of feminine hygiene products as reliable products. The question remains, however, how Lysol came to be the brand of feminine hygiene that many U.S. women chose.

### **Why Lysol?**

An explanation of the cultural context that allowed these products, even in the face of opposition, to continue to be sold in the U.S., still leaves the question of why Lysol, of all the products for feminine hygiene purposes, became the leading antiseptic douche on the market. In a market where price was a leading factor, one might assume that Lysol was simply cheaper than other products. This was not the case. Lysol and Zonite, another antiseptic product, both retailed for \$1.00 for a 16-ounce bottle, according to their ads. While economy was part of the equation for many women who chose an antiseptic douche product, instead I argue that Lysol was more rhetorically savvy in its ads. While Zonite, the leading competitor of Lysol, and Lysol both used advertising in similar venues to promote their product, Zonite was less profitable than Lysol. In



his analysis of feminine hygiene ads, Roland Marchand comments that both Lysol and Zonite used advice giving as a way to advertise its product. He writes,

Ads by Zonite products, manufacturer of an antiseptic douche, reminded readers of the desperate dearth of advice. ‘Isn’t it less embarrassing for young married women to find out themselves about Feminine Hygiene?’ asked Zonite. It’s not because her friends *won’t* tell...perhaps they are not sure themselves about Feminine Hygiene,” suggested another Zonite headline. The companies ads sympathized with the plight of the troubled, even frightened, ‘young wife without a confidante.’<sup>11</sup>

Giving advice that also promoted their product was not unique to Lysol or Zonite; many companies employed this strategy of advertising. What makes Lysol unique, however, was that it not only gave advice, but the advice it purported to give came from sources beyond the company and with more social cache- specifically medical professionals and scientific progress. While Zonite did use similar ad strategies as Lysol, Lysol was able to use its supposed ties to the medical community to appear more trustworthy. The brand name Lysol had been associated with hospitals, and therefore was also a name that Americans recognized. In a period blighted by harmful patent medicines and adulterated food, it is likely that the brand recognition encouraged women to purchase a brand with a national reputation, like Lysol, even if that reputation was built on advertisements.

Additionally, while Zonite appealed to the fear of not knowing, Lysol appealed to the resolution of fear through a middle class lens tied to women’s racial and class aspirations as mothers and wives. The euphemistic rhetoric that Lysol employed to convince the public of its trustworthiness seemed to come from authoritative sources that women wanted advice from, such as physicians. While other feminine hygiene companies did invoke science in their ads, it was not in the same way as Lysol. The “frank advice from physicians” that Lysol purported to provide colluded with the rise in public trust in physicians and hospitals. The invocation of the

“white palaces” had the added effect of aligning Lysol with the higher socio-economic classes that could afford healthcare in the new, modern hospitals. Lysol was successful in positioning itself as a trustworthy brand by placing itself adjacent to the growing credibility of the medical profession through the supposed testimony of physicians who did not exist. As many Americans had learned through the work of muckrakers, the patent medicine trade often misrepresented the safety and effectiveness of its products. By positioning itself as giving superior advice than other sources, Lysol was the beneficiary of Americans growing distrust of patent medicines, as well as women’s lack of concrete information about reproductive health. As an advertising campaign, Lysol appeared to be merely meeting a need that many other companies were competing to fill. Only Lysol was able to do so with more authority.

Cosmopolitan for May, 1925

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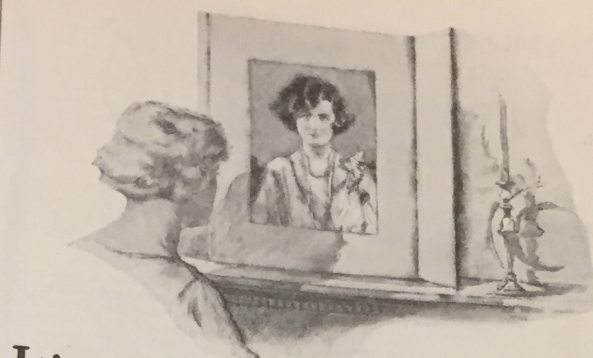
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If your druggist cannot  
supply you, send 50c  
direct to the Zonite  
Products Co.



## It's a daughter's right to know— and a mother's duty to tell her

MOTHER and daughter. It is one of nature's closest kinships, yet how often is there a gulf between!

The responsibility is chiefly that of the older woman. When apart from her daughter, she is full of good resolutions, planning to speak frankly. But when they are together she finds it increasingly difficult to approach delicate subjects, made still more delicate by the old-fashioned custom of avoidance.

What a relief it would be to have at hand in convenient form accurate information bearing on the ever-present problems of health and cleanliness which affect all womankind. Information concerning the safe practice of feminine hygiene. Information on the dangers inherent in the use of poisonous compounds—dangers familiar to every nurse and physician.

### No need to run risks with the skull-and-crossbones

At one time there was some excuse for the use of poisonous germicides such as bichloride of mercury and compounds of carbolic acid—because there was nothing to take their place.

But now Science has provided an answer to the age-old question of fastidious women, who demand complete surgical cleanliness and complete safety in use. Science has provided Zonite.

In bottles, 50c and \$1  
at drug stores

Slightly higher in Canada

### A whole medicine chest in itself

Zonite kills germs. That is why Zonite is valuable for so many different purposes. For prevention against colds, coughs, grippe and influenza. For a daily mouthwash to guard against pyorrhea and other gum infections. For cuts, wounds, burns and scratches. For use as a deodorant. Remember that Zonite, though a very powerful antiseptic, is non-poisonous and absolutely safe to use.

Zonite is the great antiseptic-germicide which has not only removed the dangers of burning, poisonous fluids in the practice of feminine hygiene, but has also removed the danger of accidental poisoning in the home.

### Compare Zonite's strength with carbolic acid

Though absolutely non-poisonous, Zonite is actually far more powerful germicidally than any dilution of carbolic acid that can be applied to the human body. And compared with peroxide of hydrogen, for instance, Zonite is more than forty times as effective! No wonder Zonite has been welcomed by the medical profession and is being prescribed by dentists everywhere as a mouthwash. Think of a powerful germicide safe to use for a mouthwash!

### Whole subject covered in booklet

The Women's Division has prepared a special booklet on Feminine Hygiene and other affairs of the toilet. It is frank, scientific, and convenient. Send for it. Read it. It is a booklet every mother will want to give her daughter. It is an important booklet and free. Use the coupon below. Zonite Products Company, Postum Building, 250 Park Ave., New York, N. Y.



Women's  
Division

ZONITE  
PRODUCTS CO.  
Postum Building  
250 Park Avenue  
New York, N. Y.

I should like to have a free  
copy of the illustrated booklet  
you have prepared. (G-7)

Name

Address

# Zonite



Figure 6.1. "Does she dare approach marriage" Hearst's Cosmopolitan, May 1925

As I explain in chapter 3, mothers were singled out by advertisers as a particular audience to target by exploiting insecurities about being a good mother, and the changing conventions of motherhood allowed advertisers to exploit the fears of women in unique and culturally acceptable ways. By appealing to the aspirations that women had about motherhood, the justifiable fear of neglecting their existing children by having too many more, and fears of death or loss of an infant for their daughters during childbirth, Lysol used the radically changing conventions of motherhood to convince women that they needed to use the Lysol douche to protect themselves and their families.

Women were also targeted as wives. As I describe in chapter 4, women were caught between the norms of Victorian marriage and companionate marriage, as well as the influence of Hollywood and the growing trend toward youth and beauty promoted by advertisers for women. Lysol used the allure of science along with exploitation of justified fears about unwanted or too many pregnancies damaging one's marriage. The ideal wife as constructed by Lysol was unattainable for most women, and entirely beyond the grasp of women who were not white and middle to upper class.

Finally, in chapter 5 this study addressed the confluence of the rise of physician authority with Lysol advertising that purported to provide advice to women from physicians. While Lysol did not engage actual physicians to endorse its product or write the copy, it wanted women to believe that the advice it gave came from physicians. This coopting of medicine and science seemed to give Lysol authority in ways that other douche products could not claim, especially given the connection between Lysol and hospital use. For many consumers who were not aware that Lysol was no longer used in child birth, the rhetorical narrative of trustworthiness may have been compelling.

Overall, then Lysol was able to sell its product due to specific rhetorical strategies, including euphemism and appeals to medical authority. As the dissertation points out, however, Lysol's campaign did more than address women in coded language. This study points to specific cultural knowledge and events that allowed Lysol be so profitable. The coded language of euphemism did come into play with terms such as "dainty," "marriage hygiene," and "kills germs," but these were not the only strategies Lysol used. Lysol also exploited a cultural moment when the average U.S. woman had little access to actual information about reproduction and birth control, but had a vested interest in controlling fertility. Additionally, the rising rates of sexually transmitted infections may have given women who were not interested in the contraceptive trade impetus to try Lysol as a way to avoid disease transmission from husbands they thought or knew were engaged in extramarital relations. The rise in media consumption, including cinematic features that focused on romantic love, influenced a desire in U.S. young people to consume products to be like their favorite movie star, and in the process also influenced how young people viewed romantic relationships and marriage. The media influenced growing acceptance of companionate marriage and the call for family limitation, but an increasing societal turn away from Victorian norms and toward an interwar modernity that valued technology and science had significant influence as well. The models of femininity, sexuality, marriage, and motherhood that women were exposed to and expected to reproduce were in a period of rapid change as well. As more mass produced products were available, the stakes of consumer life were elevated by sources that conflated consuming with national identity, personal growth, and economic freedom. Lysol ads employed strategies that were based in U.S. women's hopes for socio-economic stability, enduringly romantic marriages, and growing demand for products that promised entry into the world of youth and beauty for U.S. women.

The growing middle class and raised standard of living in the U.S. made it possible for people to consume more mass produced goods than ever before, and women felt the pressure to advance the interests of their families, socially and economically. Of course, media sources such as magazine articles, ads and radio were there to “advise” Americans on the “best” consuming practices. The story of Lysol includes rhetorical appeals using coded language, but is also about cultural pressures and currents that worked to create demand for a product that was officially not for sale in the U.S.

The Lysol case provides a compelling example of advertising history and rhetorical strategy. The dissertation has shown how the narrative of birth control rhetoric was changed in the U.S. in particular ways due to the Comstock Act, birth control advocates, and the actions of early advertisers for feminine hygiene products. However, this dissertation also makes contributions to the field of rhetoric through its examination of the euphemistic rhetoric employed by Lysol. My study shows that euphemistic rhetoric requires more than coded language. Lysol’s advertising campaign appealed widely to women’s aspirations, fears, and concerns for their lives and, importantly, did so visually. I point to the importance of visuals in euphemistic argumentation. Second, this study problematizes the concept of in-group/out-group audience constructions. Third, the Lysol case calls into question the agency of the audience in decoding euphemistic rhetoric and indicates that audiences may benefit from the practices of strategic ambiguity to an extent not previously noted by rhetorical scholars. I address each of these in further depth below.

The savvy assessment of cultural context in the deployment of euphemistic rhetoric is key to the audience buy-in of euphemistic messages. Euphemistic rhetoric does not happen in a vacuum, but instead requires the scholar to unpack the cultural and the situational. For example,

the chapter on marriage indicates it would not have been sufficient for Lysol to merely create a “wifely” persona for women; instead it was paramount that the persona created resonated for women in that time period. This was dependent on the ad makers recognizing the importance of the societal turn toward companionate marriage and the rise of romantic cinema plotlines as influential in women’s desires for romantic marriages and mutually pleasurable sexual relations. It stands to reason that rhetoricians should pay careful attention to the coded language that euphemistic rhetoric employs, but also the cultural context that makes it possible for those messages to reverberate with the audience. Lysol’s strategies included both textual appeals with coded language, but also the included visuals that underscored the messages.

The images that Lysol used to sell its products were not accidental or coincidental, especially given the amount of money that Lysol was spending on advertising. None of the Lysol ads that I reviewed for this study featured the kind of surroundings that immigrants to the U.S. would have experienced; rather, Lysol presented images that were aspirational for most. The expansive drawing rooms and expensive clothing featured in the ads were designed to appeal to women who wanted to advance in social status, even if the expensive housing and clothing featured were not part of their predicted outcomes. Lysol’s admen worked hard to convince women that its product would provide a simple solution to a very complex cultural problem. Images of happy couples, wealthy families, and adorable children in expensive clothing worked to provide a standard for American life that consumers likely knew was aspirational, but perhaps seemed more accessible for many citizens in this time period. Without the savvy exploitation of cultural context, Lysol would likely not have been the top selling feminine hygiene brand.

Lysol was not only trying to evade censors, but also sell its product to the widest audience possible. Women who were savvy enough to read the Lysol ads as pertaining to

contraception were part of a particular in-group status. Yet those who were not savvy about contraception may have read the ads as providing protection against odor or disease. The euphemistic rhetoric of the ads allowed Lysol to claim it was solving whatever problem the buyers felt they needed fixed. This multi-use strategy meant that women could read the ads any number of ways, but that there was no wrong way to read an ad as long as it resulted in a purchase from Lysol's perspective. Women who were concerned about contracting syphilis from their husbands may have had different concerns than a woman who wanted to avoid a loss of romantic love in her marriage, but Lysol ads proposed that douching with Lysol was a solution to both problems. This type of euphemistic rhetoric is important for rhetorical scholars to recognize because it upsets the concepts of in-group/ out-group polysemous readings, in which one group is able to read a subversive message and other groups are excluded from that reading. As Charles Morris describes in his work about J. Edgar Hoover, there are different populations of audiences for some culturally coded messages, which Morris names "dupes" and "clairvoyants."<sup>12</sup> Dupes are those who are able only to decode the mainstream, and in Morris's case heteronormative, message. Clairvoyants, on the other hand, are able to view the mainstream message, but also decode a second interpretation. The visuals of the ads and the euphemistic nature of the ads allow Lysol to use euphemism in a different way. There is no clear group of dupes and clairvoyants, perhaps by design, because the ads purported to provide whatever solution was most desired by the reader. Women who read the ads as protection against pregnancy and women who read the ads as merely a deodorant were part of different group statuses, but they were both potentially harmed by Lysol usage in the same way. The advantage of "getting" the message of Lysol is absent, because knowing what the message is euphemistically promoting doesn't ameliorate harm.



As I explained in the introduction, rhetoricians use the term strategic ambiguity to describe a specific type of polysemy that is planned by the author and results in multiple readings on the part of the audience. Euphemism falls under the subheading of strategic ambiguity, a type of polysemy. As Leah Ceccarelli explains, “polysemy is a rhetorical strategy employed by the calculating rhetor to bring in different audiences, through different paths, to a point of convergence in the acceptance of the text.”<sup>13</sup> However, rhetorical theory about polysemy ascribes the power of the message to the author.<sup>14</sup> The desire on the part of Lysol to evade legal troubles was clearly part of the story of the Lysol douche campaign, but I argue that the benefits of euphemistic rhetoric may extend to the audience as well as the rhetor. This is demonstrated by the ability of consumers to buy the product for personal use without detection in their local shop. Lysol allowed women to participate in social passing because of the ubiquitousness and many promoted uses of the product.<sup>15</sup> A woman could buy Lysol at the grocery, and the probable assumption of her neighbors would be that she was purchasing a cleaning product, not a contraceptive. In a period where women’s reputations were inherently tied to their social standing, the euphemistic nature of the product may have been an attractive feature for many women who did not want to be seen buying an embarrassing product at the drug store or grocery, or engage in a likely humiliating exchange with the pharmacist. The Lysol case demonstrates that the audience may play a larger role in the construction of messages where euphemistic rhetoric and strategic ambiguity are concerned.

The profitability of Lysol does raise concerns about how scholars should evaluate rhetorical appeals that culminate in physical harm for the intended audience. While conducting this study I struggled with calling the work of Lysol successful, even though it was certainly profitable. Lysol’s rhetorical strategies were successful in moving product off the shelves, but it

did so while knowingly harming consumers. By all accounts, Lysol was successful in convincing women to buy its product for feminine hygiene purposes, in no small part due to its advertising campaign's rhetorical strategies. But product sales are not the only standard by which to measure the success of an advertising campaign. One must also look at the ethical concerns of such a product that undoubtedly caused significant harm to women who used it. Lehn & Fink was able to avoid prosecution or legal recourse for the women who suffered from using Lysol due to the lax legislation for advertisers, but the lack of legal consequences does not imply that the Lysol campaign was ethical. Even after the passage of the Wheeler-Lea Act, Lysol continued to deny that its product harmed women and instead pled ignorance or blamed "allergic reactions" for the poor outcomes many women reported through the 1960s. In fact, Andrea Tone reports, "In 1961, a Lysol douche caused one woman's vagina to blister and bleed. Her husband ...complained to Lehn and Fink. The company's vice president...[replied] 'Your report is the first of its kind on record,' ...in a striking example of corporate amnesia."<sup>16</sup> While some women may have used Lysol as directed and escaped the most dire of physical harms or death, many women who were harmed either physically or through unexpected pregnancies had no legal recourse. The importance of the harm to women caused by this product is part of the narrative of Lysol rhetoric. The critic is called to address these issues of ethics as well as the rhetorical texts presented by the campaign.

That is not to say that rhetoricians should not study rhetoric that has harmed the populations it is directed at. Indeed, the discipline has no injunction on objects of study that promoted harmful outcomes; instead the real harms that came from the rhetoric of Lysol ads behoove the rhetorical scholar to uncover underlying strategies and lay bare the harmful cultural currents that allowed these types of ad campaigns to proliferate at the expense of those who used

these products. Rhetorical scholarship that acknowledges the harm that these rhetorical strategies promoted also allows these critical works to serve as a marker for those harmed and those whose stories have been erased. This dissertation hopefully functions as an advocate against future harm in these types of cases. The job of the critic is to expose not only the rhetorical strategies that the ads employed or the identity that advertisers projected for women consumers, but also to acknowledge the real harm caused by these rhetorical campaigns. The antidote to these kinds of ad campaigns is education. Once women had adequate information, the Lysol douche fell out of favor and women chose forms of birth control that were reliable and safe. It is important to note that women did not willingly use a product that they knew would cause them harm; they used the only product that they had access to, often with adverse outcomes. Rhetorical critics must address the harms in these kinds of campaigns to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves and to prevent these types of campaigns from causing future harm.

While the Lysol douche is no longer advertised by the Lehn and Fink Company, the strategies that they used are still being used by pharmaceutical companies that advertise birth control products. In a recent ad for an intrauterine device (IUD) marketed by the Bayer company called Skyla, a conventionally attractive young woman makes decisions to hold off on child bearing so that she can focus on other interests. The tag line to the ad reads, “My music is my baby now.”<sup>17</sup> The woman is pictured alone in what appears to be a urban apartment holding a guitar and in close proximity to a record player. This ad is one of a series that also pictures women engaging other activities, including going to college or having a career or engaging in international travel. Curiously, one ad features a young woman standing at the bottom of a slide catching a cello, in a pantomime of what mothers do when their children are on the slide. These ads on the surface appear to be much more inclusive. The ads feature women of color alongside

white women, and present a variety of choices for women, including careers and educational attainment. This progress indicates a growing sense of the importance and cultural significance of addressing more populations of women in these types of ads. The ads clearly speak in a more direct tone to women, and do not engage in talking down to women. All of this can be seen as progress, and perhaps speaks to the inclusion of more women in the advertising field.

However, the ads still indicate that birth control is primarily the domain of women. Ads for Skyla only feature women making decisions about birth control. Another Bayer product, Mirena, which is marketed for women who already have at least one child but want to avoid conceiving another child for an extended period of time, are remarkably similar in only featuring women in their ads.<sup>18</sup> Even ads for a product that assumes a long term, monogamous relationship that would arguably involve input from a partner about future conception only feature women making decisions about birth control, thereby continuing to place the burden on women to engage in fertility control behaviors. While it may be true that women face the physical outcomes of pregnancy, and have a more vested interest in avoiding pregnancy, the pressure on women to control their fertility as a sole responsibility speaks to the cultural legacy of the time period of Lysol. Given that producing a fetus requires genetic material from both sexes, it seems that the cultural standards of birth control in the U.S. haven't changed much. Even the tag line of Skyla, "Plans prioritized," seems to indicate that women must choose between an increasing number of opportunities and becoming pregnant, but that men are not part of those plans. These cultural messages are not missed by young women who are increasingly delaying childbearing.

Contemporary ads also retain the aspirational nature of the Lysol ads. Gone are the stuffy drawing rooms of the Lysol ads, but the women featured in current birth control ads are still aspirational. The nature of those aspirations has changed from being the wife who entertains to

support her husband's career to having a particular career or travelling abroad or any number of other activities that are likely not within the reach of the entire population of women whom the ad addresses. This continues to frame contraception as a luxury good, as opposed to a necessary part of modern life for most women. The idea that women still need to be prudent consumers of birth control products continues to bolster arguments about the optional nature of birth control as an individual choice for individual women, as opposed to a public good. The economic costs of a child are part of the narrative of the ads as well as the ads acknowledge that women can make different choices when they aren't supporting a child. The consumer model of birth control lives on in pharmaceutical ads that continue to depict birth control as a luxury choice that will provide freedom from the concerns of fertility. Especially in the case of the IUD, companies advertise the ease and freedom of "not thinking about a daily pill" and not replacing the IUD for five years. The empowerment messages that are present in current ads do signify a cultural shift in expectations for women though. The ads for Skyla and Mirena do not explicitly address marriage, even though IUDs are ideally used in long-term, monogamous relationships because they don't protect from sexually transmitted infections. Women are not portrayed as needing to satisfy their husband's sex drives; instead, sex has mostly disappeared from the conversation and been replaced by "choices" and lists of advantages of long term birth control. That is not to say that the advantages of long term birth control are not worth considering. The IUD is clearly a step past douching with Lysol, but the underlying assumption that women need to use their consumer power to free themselves from fertility is still an undergirding argument in contemporary birth control ads.

Cultural norms of reproduction are still present in birth control ads, however. Women are still portrayed as delaying conception, as opposed to making permanent choices about their

fertility. None of the current ads seem to frame the woman featured as making a permanent decision to avoid having children, instead just delaying child bearing to pursue other goals. So while women are acknowledged as making more choices, and addressed in different ways by ads, the narrative of birth control is still one that is dominated by women and it is assumed that woman will have children within long term monogamous relationships eventually. While men are sparingly pictured in some contemporary birth control ads as part of a couple, the primary focus is still on women for fertility control. When pharmaceutical companies create a birth control product for men, perhaps this narrative will change. Until then, women still seem to be the audience of most messages about birth control.

Advertising for birth control continues to be a U.S. phenomenon, which may have to do with how American society views both health care and child bearing responsibilities. Given the current arguments over who is deserving of healthcare, and how much it should cost, it seems important to note that the use of birth control continues to be a sticking point for American society even as most U.S. women do use some form of birth control throughout their lives. As a country we still have one of the highest teen birth rates, yet as a culture we cannot seem to move beyond political arguments that condemn women for their sexuality and birth control usage. Americans argue about why they should have to pay for the perceived misbehavior of others and recapitulate narratives of welfare queens and universal daycare as polarizing discourse. Morality concerns abound about others bedroom habits and medical needs. Women who engage in sexual behavior outside the bounds of white, heteronormative, marriage continue to be treated as bodies that need to be disciplined by consumer products and legislation. Women who choose not to have children are treated as though they have betrayed biology, while women who have too many children are judged as lacking in restraint. U.S. women certainly have more choices about

birth control now, but the luxury of birth control is still not afforded to all women in the U.S. equally and reproductive freedom is still mostly the province of those who can afford it. Advertising for birth control has grown more progressive and inclusive, even if we still have a long way to go.

Lysol was able to convince the American people that a product that was potentially deadly was endorsed by physicians and used in hospitals, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. This dissertation has catalogued the ways in which Lysol was able to rhetorically position itself as a more compelling advice giver by employing euphemistic rhetoric that shrewdly capitalized on the current cultural zeitgeist. In pointing out the cultural and sociological qualities of this euphemistic rhetoric, this dissertation makes important contributions to the study of both rhetoric and birth control. This case study provides a socio-historical look into the history of birth control in this country, but also conveys the social norms of gender in advertising in the 1920s and 1930s. The advent of the Progressive movement in the 1910s brought change to the U.S. in terms of living conditions, especially for those who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, but also opened the door for advertisers to prey on the fears of those who felt that they were not acceptable, or suitable, by societal standards. In this way, companies such as Lehn and Fink were able to make large profits from products that were not only ineffective, but hazardous to the people who used them. However, the rhetorical strategies that were developed by advertisers during this time period were undoubtedly effective and continue to be used by advertisers today.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Joan M. Chow et al., "The Association Between Chlamydia Trachomatis and Ectopic Pregnancy: A Matched-Pair, Case-Control Study," *JAMA* 263 (1990): 3164-7.
- <sup>2</sup> Harold A. Kaminetzky, "Vaginal Biology and the Douche," *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 191 (1964): 950-51.
- <sup>3</sup> See H.I. Silverman, "Household Detergents as Douches," *JAMA* 180 (1962): 86 and Samuel R. Meaker, "The Vaginal Douche," *JAMA*, 87 (1926):1377-79.
- <sup>4</sup> Frank A. Stahl, "The Douche. Its Rise and Decline, but Present Restoration," *JAMA* XXXIII (1899): 847.
- <sup>5</sup> Norman E. Himes, *Medical History of Contraception* (New York: Schocken Books, 1936), 326.
- <sup>6</sup> Himes, *Medical History of Contraception*, 330.
- <sup>7</sup> "Accident of Birth," *Fortune*, February 1938, 84.
- <sup>8</sup> Rachel Lynn Palmer and Sarah Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds in Women's Health* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1936).
- <sup>9</sup> Palmer and Greenberg, *Facts and Frauds*, 143-4.
- <sup>10</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 170-1.
- <sup>11</sup> Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 344.
- <sup>12</sup> Charles Morris, "Pink Herring and the Fourth Persona: J. Edgar Hoover's Sex Crime Panic" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88.2 (2002): 229-31.
- <sup>13</sup> Leah Ceccarelli, "Polysemy: Multiple meanings in Rhetorical Criticism" *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 84.4 (1998): 396.
- <sup>14</sup> Leah Ceccarelli describes the role of the audience as either accepting of the author's message or pushing back against the author's intended message. Audiences who choose to read a different message than the rhetor intended are considered "defiant" audiences because they usurp the meaning imbued by the author. Ceccarelli, "Polysemy," 396.
- <sup>15</sup> Morris, "Pink Herring and the Fourth Persona", 230.
- <sup>16</sup> Tone, *Devices and Desires*, 173.
- <sup>17</sup> Bayer, "Home," <http://www.skyla-us.com/index.php> (accessed March 27, 2017).
- <sup>18</sup> Bayer, "About," <https://www.mirena-us.com/about-mirena/> (accessed March 27, 2017).



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